

You know it's going to be a good night when it starts (in jest, of course) with, "Tonight, we are going to just ROAST Jason," to a resounding response of, "WOOOOOO!!!"

Who would expect anything less from high school night?

Parents of high school students were invited to join us at youth group on Tuesday night as another opportunity to get to know pastoral candidate Jason Swanson and his wife Shannon. We had over 70 people join us for a time of worship through song, listening to Jason and Shannon's testimony, and question and answer time.

Jason asked Shannon to start off their sharing time by giving her testimony. She was born in southern California and then raised near Sun Valley in Idaho. She described herself as a very cautious, thoughtful, sometimes fearful child who always followed all of the rules. While she was five years old when she first understood the gospel and put her faith in Christ, it wasn't until ninth grade during a trip to Canada where she fully experienced God's love and grace as an active relationship for the first time. She did missions trips through Young Life all through high school and eventually felt God's call on her life to go into missions. She recalled being fascinated by the fact that there were actually people on earth who'd never heard of the Bible, and felt God continuously drawing her attention specifically to tribal bush missions.

After high school, Shannon went to Masters College where she went on numerous missions trip to Mexico, Inner City, LA, etc. She then completed a six-week college level course in Papua New Guinea through New Tribes and changed her major from Elementary Education to Missions Studies with the intent to go back to PNG as a full time missionary. In her third year at Masters, she met her soon-to-be husband Jason in a prayer group. She told us about God's perfect plan in aligning both her and Jason's sights specifically on PNG missionary work before they'd even met each other, and after getting married and having their first child, they moved to Papua New Guinea in September of 1998.

At this time Jason shared his testimony, which was already eloquently summarized by Doug in Monday's recap of the RBC Mens' meeting. I highly recommend reading his summary if you'd like more insight into Jason's personal testimony up through arriving in Papua New Guinea.

Jason told us about the development of a love for God's Word in the tribe over the first years they were there. At one point, Jason was going to begin teaching through Acts, and the church wanted him to start immediately the next day saying, "This is our food." They had gone their whole lives without the knowledge of Christ, and now that they had it, they wanted Jason to teach every day of the week. It stayed that way for 10 years until Jason and Shannon felt the call to return to the states.

Other than the fact that the tribal church was now fully formed and self-sufficient, this return was also due in part to the fact that they wanted to invest in their kids (Kara had reached college age) and be together as a family during their integration back into life in the States. Jason mentioned that once missionary kids reach college age, oftentimes their

parents might essentially drop their kids off and go back into the mission field. Jason said they wanted to make that transition together, so they all moved back and started seeking out God's next step for them in the states.

Jason knew that his desire to preach and teach would lead them into seeking a job as a pastor, and he felt it'd be wise to go to seminary prior to seeking a pastorate. He then began the task of applying to churches and seeking God's next step for their family. When recalling his introduction to RBC while he was applying to churches, Jason said, "This church just stood out to us from the beginning." He recalled that it was a very long process to go through the candidating process at RBC, and that process discernment was one of the things that drew him here. He kept feeling more and more drawn to this church body as the months moved along.

Jason and Shannon have four kids. Kara is 21, and she is an author and works with the Harris brothers. She has an agent and has authored five books so far. Blake is 20 and loves to surf, snowboard, and do anything sports related. He just finished his first year of community college and is considering studying kinesiology. Wesley just turned 16 and is described as their quiet and thoughtful kid who loves to discuss theology. Kylie is 12 and enjoys being homeschooled by Shannon. When they were in PNG, homeschooling was the only option for education in the tribe. They continue to enjoy homeschooling now but "by no means are homeschool-or-die." They are very convinced of God's ability to grow and mature kids whether they're homeschooled, private school, or in public school, and are open to whatever kind of schooling God calls them to if they move to Temecula.

An interesting side note that a few members of the search team have noticed is the tendency for Jason and Shannon to communicate with each other very briefly and subtly in the Siawi language. One of these exchanges happened during this time and I almost missed it. It is really cool to me to see how much their time in PNG still permeates so much of their everyday lives.

Jason then shared a few stories about what they called the "Swanson Zoo" that they developed in PNG. If you get a chance, ask Jason to tell you about Beaker, his Great Hornbill that he raised from a chick.

At this point in the evening, Shane opened up our time to questions from the audience. I will do my best to summarize these questions and Jason's responses.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS SUMMARY

Q: How did you make the transition from being a missionary in PNG to candidating to be the senior pastor at RBC?

You know you're a preacher if you can't see yourself doing anything else other than preaching the word of God. Since I've left the mission field overseas, all I've been thinking about is teaching and preaching and being able to dump our lives into people. Being at the camp is torture because I'm not able to do any of this. There's also the strong desire to be

back in close community with other believers. When you're overseas, camaraderie develops with other missionaries and you become a family. Those relationships were very hard to walk away from. Every night we'd gather around the radio and talk to one another and live life together. Some of our desire to be here is to get back to a family like that. One of the strong pulls of RBC is that you're not like other big churches that I've been involved in. You guys are tight. In PNG, my kids couldn't fully understand the language and didn't fully fit into the culture. To come back home and be plugged into a church where they belong and understand the language is really valuable. My kids are very excited at the prospect of coming to RBC. That's very important. When kids are little you can pull them all around, but they're older now, and they need to have a say. They're more excited to come to RBC than any other church we've candidated for.

Q: I see that you have a vision for our church. Where does our youth fit in to that?

The youth are very important and we need to incorporate them into everything we do. It's not like kids are going to just gravitate towards things of God unless you give them wings and teach them to move towards these things. I would love to take kids with me back to visit our tribe. I also really appreciate that kids are already getting plugged into the main church body through things like Cross Training. I personally want to get involved because my own children are the age where they will be participating in youth ministries. I want to invest in all of these kids because they can totally have a huge impact on a church.

Q: What advice would you give to younger people wanting to glorify God in their everyday life but are stuck in this little town?

It can be easy to have the mentality that glorifying God means doing huge things with lots of impact, but this shouldn't be the case. You need to first start with your relationship with the Lord. Before I bring the Word on Sundays, the passages that I studied better have affected me in my own life and heart. Before you start getting focused on others, you need to focus on your relationship with the Lord, prayer, and worship; and then go out from there. Focus on youth group. How do you present yourself and how you lead, or don't lead? How do you conduct yourself? The Lord will give us opportunities to glorify Him and yet we're so often closed off to them. You need to be inspired to step out of your comfort zone, share the gospel, and take a risk.

Q: How do you envision yourself leading Shane and Austen as they lead the youth?

Great question. As a senior pastor, our roles are different, but Shane and Austen are co-laborers in Christ. They are fellow shepherds. Some of my coolest times in PNG were hanging out the elders in the tribe. These relationships can't just take place at church. They need to go beyond that and have mutual accountability. We will obviously talk about goals and programs and things like that too, but I'm referring more to that deeper personal connection. Will there be times where I'll challenge them? Yeah. And I'll need challenging too. We are not men on separate islands. We all need each other.

Q: You mentioned the roles are different. When you think about your role as Sr. Pastor, what is your role with the students? Will you shepherd Shane so he can shepherd the students?

I've never been in this position before so, to be honest, I don't know what that is going to look like. I know that I will be personally involved because my kids are here, and I am of one of "those" parents. I also love speaking to youth and I've done that many times. I want to be very careful not to throw my family time under the bus and run out to do all of these separate things; I need to be wise with my time. But the life of the body includes the children; includes MY children, I have a personal, vested interest in them.

Q: What are your thoughts on community outreach?

A church is not supposed to be an entity unto itself. We're not supposed to be a bubble. When the people in our tribe understood the gospel, they could have kept it all there in the tribe. God's design is that He would use His church to reach the world, so I think it's important to have serious intentionality on how this is done. I'm not very familiar with what has happened in the past with outreach, but it's always important to get involved in the high schools, sports teams, camp, youth group, etc. Bring in people from the outside. There are a lot of things we should consider being involved in in the community. (Jason then asked the original asker if had any ideas. He responded that RBC has been involved in FCA and other similar ministries and that it's encouraging to see kids get plugged in to these ministries and find answers.)

Q: Do you see yourself coming onboard and stirring the pot and turning RBC upside down, or do you intend to come alongside what is already happening?

No not by any stretch of the imagination would I think of making this church go through any big changes. Even considering everything this church went through, I don't think the RBC church body has been completely broken. Yes, there are ramifications of what happened, but by God's grace I want to see healing. I want to see unity. I'm very excited and passionate about that. With Erik, and Austen and all the guys; it's uncanny that I already feel so much love for them. I recognize that sometimes in churches personalities sometimes don't mix. But your staff is made up of seriously awesome guys and I'm thrilled to death at an opportunity to come serve alongside them. I'm not the kind of guy who's going to come and say, "You've been doing worship here for 20 years, but you're doing it all wrong!" I'm not going to tell Nathan how to do Awana. I'm going to encourage him and spur him on and if he needs someone to come along beside him, I want to be a support. Ministry is not always going to be a bed of roses. In PNG, I had coworkers that left us. We had people shooting arrows at us, people trying to kill children in our village, trying to set our church on fire. We understand opposition, but we are committed to being here for the long haul. Together, with this existing staff we can do a lot better job at leading this church than I can on my own. I'm going to be incredibly loyal and incredibly committed to this church.

Q: You mentioned you wouldn't make any major changes, but are there smaller things you'd like to see changed?

At this point I don't think I know enough to say. The first thing that came to my mind is staff meetings. I want to be praying, singing, and spending time in the Word together. As far as the church goes, I don't know yet. Whatever it is that I do, I want to do it well.

Shane closed the evening with a few comments about Jason, confirming that the love and chemistry felt by Jason is not one sided. He said that he feels like he's known Jason for way longer than he actually has. Shane validated the idea that this process may feel very fast for some here at RBC, but that we've (Search Team, Elders, Pastors) had months to get to know Jason and thoroughly examine his fit with RBC. Jason is not just a man who is going to fill a role in a church, but he is a man that God is equipping specifically for RBC. Shane is excited to serve in ministry alongside a man like Jason, and serve our great God to the best of their abilities.

Reported by Bree Lathrop