

Jones new 4-H agent for county

By Pam Chickering Wilson pchickering@gmail.com | Posted: Wednesday, October 12, 2016 8:30 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson County's new 4-H/Youth Development Agent brings a wealth of experience, from 10 years as a 4-Her to youth leadership, internships, State Fair work, serving as a 4-H agent in different counties and coordinating multi-county camps.

Bruce Jones, of Cambridge, currently is concluding his 17-year position as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Janesville, and officially will start as the county 4-H agent on Nov. 1.

"I am and always have been an educator," Jones said. "I'm just changing my subject."

Prior to serving as a pastor, he spent six years as a 4-H agent in New York State, with the Cornell Cooperative Extension (connected with the land grant university in that state, Cornell University.)

"I was in two different counties as an agent for six years, and I also served as a summer assistant and program assistant for another year," Jones said.

In between those positions, he taught high school vocational agriculture for seven months.

He jumped into the teaching position mid-year, replacing a controversial teacher who had been beloved by the students but disliked by administration, so it was kind of an uncomfortable place to be, Jones said.

But his passion for education, working with young people and families never wavered.

Originally from the small town of Madrid, N.Y., Jones was an active 4-Her in his youth for a decade in St. Lawrence County.



Bruce Jones

The youngest of five children, he watched his older brother enter Cornell University with the intention of becoming an extension agent. Ultimately, the brother became a teacher.

Jones followed in his brother's footsteps, attending Cornell and taking 4-H-related summer jobs in the meantime. He graduated in 1986 with a bachelor of science degree in agriculture education.

As he was getting ready to enter the workforce full-time, the national budget for extension programs was slashed, so while there were a lot of vacant positions, few were being filled.

"It was the same kind of situation Wisconsin finds itself in right now, with the UW-Extension facing cuts," Jones said. "That's why this position I'm entering in November is titled an interim position."

He said Wisconsin currently is looking at doing the same thing that New York did several decades before, having agents represent multiple counties and work together to oversee shared events.

This might happen in areas of Wisconsin where the 4-H program is not as strong, but the current feeling is that Jefferson County's 4-H program is vibrant enough to warrant an agent of its own, Jones said.

In the early 1990s, Jones entered the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, earning a Master of Divinity degree in 1996. Later that year he became pastor of the United Church of Muscoda (Presbyterian) and in 1999 moved to the First Presbyterian Church in Janesville where he currently is serving.

In the intervening years, he also pursued his doctorate in ministry, also through the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.

Jones came to Janesville 17 1/2 years ago to be pastor of the Presbyterian church. He married, and he and his wife now have two children.

His wife, Krista, works as principal of Nicolet Middle School in Cambridge and also serves as director of Pupil Services for that school district.

Their oldest son, Jonathan, currently is in the eighth grade and their other son, Alex, is in the fifth grade in the Cambridge schools.

"We started them in the Rock County Christian Schools, but later open-enrolled them in public education because we want to teach them to live with their values in the real world," Jones noted.

The breadth of educational programming and athletic opportunities also were big factors in favor of the public schools, he added.

Alex has been in the Cambridge schools since second grade, and Jonathan since the sixth grade.

The family moved to Cambridge in June, and Jones was scoping out opportunities to work closer to home when he learned of the open 4-H agent position.

“I had three days to get my resume together and get everything ready,” Jones said.

He submitted his application in early August and underwent a telephone interview Aug. 24 with regional 4-H staff.

In September, he interviewed in person with Jefferson County staff and the University of Wisconsin-Extension Board.

“I was offered the position provisionally by the end of the week, but because of my role as pastor, I had to follow the proper protocols, submitting my resignation to the church board and then informing the congregation,” Jones said.

He has been able to meet staff members during the transition but still is working full-time as a pastor until his official start date.

Jones said he is a true believer in 4-H as a great way to develop young people’s skills, character and values. They learn perseverance through working in their chosen projects, learn how to do proper recordkeeping and how to keep financial accounts — skills that will serve them for a lifetime — and have many levels of opportunities for leadership and achievement.

As the youngest child in a large family, Jones said 4-H pretty much always was a part of his life. He remembered camping at the fairgrounds at the age of 3 or 4 and following his older siblings around.

His dad served as the sheep superintendent in his home county, despite being a businessman and knowing “nothing about sheep,” he said. His sons developed the experience that their father lacked, however.

When he entered 4-H, Jones started showing Jersey cows. When his family sold its dairy herd, he switched to sheep, inheriting the remainder of his brother’s flock when that brother entered college.

He also participated in the foods project, recalling the date-nut bread that he took to state fair.

“I had to bake that three different times because the first two times it didn’t turn out like it had at county fair,” Jones said.

He attended 4-H camp from the age of 9 and up. He started as a camper, then became a junior counselor and then a counselor, also serving as a lifeguard and overseeing woodcraft activities.

Jones served on the teen council at the county level and became the first president of the county level sheep club.

“It was a great experience,” he said.

From 1984 through 1987, Jones served as the superintendent of the sheep show at the New York State Fair.

Then, when he went on to college, he served as a junior leader at the state fair, and a 4-H agent there suggested he look into following that career path himself.

He did work/study jobs at the 4-H office for three years and took a summer assignment in Broome County, N.Y.

State fair officials sought out his help when its entry department switched from paper to computerized entries.

After graduation from college, Jones served as a summer assistant in Delaware County (on the Delaware River.) That position wound up stretching through December as the local 4-H agent went on sabbatical.

After the brief aforementioned stint teaching high school agriculture, he moved to the Lewis County 4-H office where he worked for three and a half years, and then Montgomery County where he served as a higher-level agent overseeing not only that county but also a six-county 4-H camp.

Almost two decades ago, Jones deviated from what previously had been his career path, entering the ministry. He has been very happy serving as a pastor, but with a young family and a new home in Cambridge, he knew it was time for a change.

He said he is not looking to make any immediate changes upon stepping up as the Jefferson County 4-H agent.

“Coming from 20 years away from 4-H and from a state 800 miles away, I really need to find out how you do things here,” Jones said. “I want to take the time to learn, ask questions, and evaluate what works and what doesn’t, which is different with every group, organization and personality.”

He said he believes he will be able to work well with the existing staff of the UW-Extension Jefferson County office, and is looking to fulfill the old 4-H motto: “To make the best better!”

“This will be a great opportunity for me to get back into working with young people, back to my agricultural roots,” Jones said.

He said he is excited to start his new position and is looking forward to meeting the county leaders and youth.

“Also, I can’t wait for fair, because I love fair food,” Jones said.