



## FOR THE SOUL

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# {CULTURE}



*The God Of The Mountain  
Is Still The God Of The Valley*



# COME AS YOU ARE

BRINGING TRADITIONAL VALUES TO AN UNTRADITIONAL SETTING, COWBOY CHURCHES ARE LEADING THE LOST TO THE CROSS.

By Shannon Stewart Salinsky

IT'S A WARM SUNDAY MORNING AND THE SUN IS WELL ABOVE THE HORIZON, WHEN A GROUP OF RUGGED COWBOYS AND COWGIRLS—SOME 1,800 STRONG—GATHER AT THE COWBOY CHURCH OF ELLIS COUNTY IN WAXAHACHIE, TEXAS.

From the road, the building itself looks more like a warehouse; inside, however, it feels a little more “churchy,” with a cross directly behind the pastor’s podium. Juxtaposing the traditional church atmosphere are thoroughly Western appointments: several saddles perched on a high shelf lining each side of the large seating area, with a few ropes sprinkled about to top off the Western look. But the real cowboy feel comes from the warm, heartfelt greetings reaching your ears. Most people are in boots and jeans, cowboy hats rest atop several heads, and even a few spurs jangle as the wearer strolls down the aisle to find a seat. A bluegrass band strums classic gospel hymns that would cause anyone’s mind to race back to their childhood. Though it’s somewhat unconventional when viewed through the lens of “traditional” church, they’re simply common appointments inside a church designed for those of the Western heritage.

Every Sunday, Pastor Gary Morgan brings the Gospel to his flock of devotees; today’s lesson is about the simplicity of the bible.

“I brought a little friend with me today,” he said, pointing to a turtle perched on top of a nearby fencepost that adorns the stage. He asks the congregation how the turtle got on top of the fence post: Did someone put him there, or did he crawl up there?

“People spend a lot of energy trying to get the bible to say what they want it to, rather than just accepting it just as it’s written. The Bible is really pretty simple,” he said. The turtle is as effective as the sermon.

## Spreading Like Wildfire

A central figure in the global cowboy church movement was Ellis County Cowboy Church’s Founding Pastor Ron Nolen. Introduced to team roping by his son, it was there he discovered an entire segment not being reached by the traditional church. Ron says God gave him a burden to reach this group with a culture-based “church for the unchurched” approach. Ellis County Cowboy Church opened its doors in March 2000.





The Texas Fellowship of Cowboy Churches was founded to resource cowboy churches being funded by the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Before long, the TFCC began to receive cries for help from out of state, so a sister organization—the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches—was founded to fulfill those requests. In 2010, the two groups merged under the AFCC banner.

In a relatively short period of time, the AFCC has grown to include more than 200 churches. While most are located in Texas, other states have caught the Western version of the Holy Spirit's wave—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Tennessee, Mississippi, Kansas, Montana, and Minnesota each have at least one cowboy church, according to the AFCC.

With cowboy churches popping up like wildflowers, it soon became clear a “how-to” guide was needed. To meet this need, the AFCC began hosting regional “Ranch House Schools” for cowboy church planting. With it came knowledge and teaching about how to provide biblical structure to support the unique challenges that face churches with limited spiritual leadership and financial resources.

Interest in cowboy churches has continued to spread like wildfire, spurring Dallas Baptist University to develop a four-course certificate program in Western Heritage Ministry. Charles Higgs, Director of Western Heritage Ministry at Baptist General Convention of Texas, works with the AFCC to help grow the culture.

“They’re the boots on the ground, and we work together to grow cowboy churches,” he said.



## Large & Small

For years, the Cowboy Church of Ellis County has ranked as one of the nation's largest cowboy churches—with more than 4,000 members and as many as 1,800 in regular attendance, that still holds true today.

“There’s no doubt that some of the excitement has passed since the inception of the cowboy church,” Gary said. “Nevertheless, now is the time to not sit back in the saddle, but to keep things fresh and be more determined than ever to reach the lost.”

On a smaller scale, the Cowboy Crossing Church in Hugo, Oklahoma, averages slightly more than 100 in regular attendance. Pastor Mike Merritt says the cowboy church movement is more than being a cowboy or wearing boots.

“This is a Western culture,” he said. “More than 80 percent of Oklahoma’s revenue is directly tied to the horse and cattle industries. This is a dug-in culture that’s here to stay.”

The Cowboy Crossing Church is seven years old. The building itself is an old horse barn, with no heat or air-conditioning and a dirt floor, but lack of amenities hasn’t kept the faithful away.

“COME TO ME, ALL YOU COWBOYS WHO ARE TUCKERED OUT AND TIRED OF HOLDIN’ A HEAVY HEART, AND I’LL GIVE YOU REST.”

—Matthew 11:28

“The Lord has shown us very clearly that all we need is Him. We’ve been in church when it was only 12 degrees and we’ve had more than 150 people there in attendance. It’s about being faithful to God,” Mike said. “Our goal is to make people comfortable and share a brief sermon so they can get on with their ranching and rodeoing. In the traditional church, we got caught up in trying to change people. We need to get back to lettin’ the Lord do the work. Here at our church, we catch ‘em, and God cleans ‘em!”

One challenge facing the cowboy church is the paradox of not singling out new visitors, yet trying to reach out to them to encourage membership. It’s nice to have an occasional visitor, but the real goal is to make a connection with a person so they come back and eventually join the church.



A tenet of the cowboy church is that visitors aren't asked to identify themselves.

"We bend over backwards not to single anyone out at our church," Gary said. "We don't give out name tags, hand out visitor's cards or ask anyone to raise their hands. We just want you to feel at home when you come. A lot of folks won't even feel like they're at church until the preaching starts. Then the Holy Spirit begins to move and they realize God is touching their heart."

"Frankly, most of the ministry happens after 85–90 percent of the people have left. The troubled people seem to hang back and want to talk after the crowd thins out. We've trained our staff to watch for this, and it works pretty well for us."

"Our big downfall is that our back door can become larger than our front door. Some kind of discipleship must be offered in order to keep people coming back," Charles said. It's a challenge that has a lot of the cowboy church leaders and pastors discussing strategies and thoughts of how to stay true to the tenet but also to reach out to visitors so they'll return.

## More than a Church

Cowboy church is more than just brick and mortar; other types of ministries are unique to the Western heritage. Tim O'Neil Ministries is an evangelistic ministry that reaches people in a unique way.

"I was working with a 2-year-old colt one night to get him saddled. He suddenly stopped, faced up and slowly began to walk toward me. It was in that moment that I realized the lesson of a true relationship," Founder Tim O'Neal said.

Tim, a lifetime APHA member from Fort Scott, Kansas, compares his life to the demeanor of an unbroken colt: strong-willed and unpredictable.

"It was through my understanding about horses and watching how they learned to trust me that I began to understand that I too needed to trust the trainer of my life," Tim said.

Just like the colt in the round pen, Tim says he realized the Lord was there, just wanting him to come closer.

"Just as the colt faces up to the trainer and the relationship begins, so do we begin to trust in Christ as we face up to Him," he said.

Cowboy churches and ministries often illustrate their sermons with down-home examples that resonate with their congregations. In addition, most also offer some kind of Western culture activities outside of weekly church service: bull riding, barrel racing, team sorting, and various other equine events. From fishing and four-wheeler outings to more traditional church groups like bible study and divorce recovery, there's something for everyone in the cowboy church model.

## Down Home

Many people being baptized in the cowboy church are 30 years old and up, Charles says, clearly illustrating the cowboy church's knack for reaching those who have been out of touch with traditional religion for much of their adult lives.

"On the average, we baptize 30 people a year in one church; we have more than 200 churches so that's roughly 6,000 folks a year being baptized in our churches," he said. "I've even baptized folks in their 70s before."

Cowboy churches are helping an entire section of society be reminded that they can enjoy a relationship with their creator despite their background, education level, how much money is in their pocket or what they wear. Ask anyone at a cowboy church, and they'll tell you that God meets you where you are. For years, many people have skipped "Sunday Meetings" just because they don't feel comfortable in a traditional church.

Take away fancy mood lighting, smoky stages, theatrics and "Sunday dress" clothes—instead, give them a down-to-earth cowboy with a bible and a simple message; that will git 'er done just fine with this crowd. The informal, come-as-you-are setting is not only real, but it's inviting, too. It's something many have longed for and finally found. And when the sermon and singing are over, they can head right back out to the pasture or the barn and carry on with their chores. After all, those horses have to be fed and tended to every day, even on Sunday. 

