

Cowboy church rounds up strays in Brenham

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BRENHAM—Although the [Cowboy Church of Brenham](#) opened its doors fewer than six months ago, it has been on Steve Westbrook's mind a long time.

At its first service in January, Cowboy Church up Brenham initially set up 125 chairs and expected about 100 people to come. The church had to set up nearly 200 additional chairs to accommodate the crowd.

(PHOTOS/Courtesy of Cowboy Church of Brenham)

"I went to my first cowboy church service about five or six years ago," said Westbrook, worship pastor of the church and executive director of the Sheriff's Association of Texas. "God started working on me. After I left there I said: 'You know, we could use something like this in Brenham. There are people not being reached who could be reached by a cowboy church.'"

Westbrook was a member at [First Baptist Church of Brenham](#) at the time. He had been a deacon more than 20 years and was active in the music program.

"I was content and happy with my role in First Baptist," Westbrook said. "I thought: 'What I'm doing here is good. Why should I step out and do something different?' Finally, last summer God said, 'Look, if somebody's going to make a move on this thing, you've got to take the first step.' So I

did."

He spoke with Steven Ponder, senior pastor at First Baptist Church. They prayed together, talked about strategies and contacted the Baptist General Convention of Texas to get help with planning. Texas Baptists' help provide funding for church starts through the Cooperative Program and gifts to the [Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions](#).



Worship Pastor Steve Westbrook (center) had been a deacon more than 20 years and was active in the music program at First Baptist Church of Brenham when he believed God gave him a burden for reaching people in the western-heritage culture.

(PHOTOS/Courtesy of Cowboy Church of Brenham)

"Texas Baptists and First Baptist Church of Brenham have done a lot for us," Westbrook said. "The funding they gave helped us get started by covering everything from advertising to getting our website built and up and going."

On the Sunday of their Jan. 10 launch, Cowboy Church set up 125 chairs and expected about 100 people to come.

"Fortunately, we had additional chairs stacked in the back of the building, because our first Sunday we had 321 people show up," Westbrook said. "We were just in awe."

Experienced church planters told Westbrook attendance often drops by up to 50 percent in services following a new church plant's launch. That hasn't been the case for Cowboy Church of Brenham.

"The next Sunday we had 280," Westbrook said. "We've averaged around 300, with the exception of Easter. On Easter Sunday we had 460 people. We had all the chairs we could find, but we had people standing and people outside watching and listening through the open doors."



Cowboy Church of Brenham sends first-time visitors home with a small loaf of homemade bread.
(PHOTOS/Courtesy of Cowboy Church of Brenham)

In addition to serving as the worship pastor, Westbrook handles all administrative duties for the church. He works as a volunteer. The only paid staff member is teaching pastor Jack Meeker.

"Whatever we need as far as any counseling or visitations, we all kind of do that— myself, Jack, and two lay pastors," Westbrook said.

Most cowboy churches operate with few paid staff, instead relying on church members' involvement in ministry teams.

Cowboy churches have spread and multiplied rapidly since the movement began in 1999. Five years ago, there were between 30 and 40 cowboy churches affiliated with the BGCT. Today, there are 175.

The [Texas Fellowship of Cowboy Churches](#) was started in 2005 to connect Texas Baptists' cowboy churches. When western-heritage churches outside Texas wanted to connect with the movement, Texas Baptists helped start the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches.

"The goal by the end of 2018 is to have 400 cowboy churches inside Texas and 200 outside Texas related to the AFCC," said Charles Higgs, director of Texas Baptists' western-heritage ministry.

About 20 percent of the 25 million people in Texas relate to western-heritage culture, Higgs said. Many factors keep these people from feeling comfortable in traditional churches, from the music to style of dress. Cowboy churches have built bridges for this unreached group by integrating culture and church.

"At cowboy churches, we've lowered some barriers to attract unchurched people," Higgs said. "We don't have an altar call. We go through the plan of salvation, and if they pray the prayer, they fill out a card and put it in the feed bucket or the boot. Same with the offering. We don't pass an offering plate, but if people want to give money to the church they can put it in a boot or bucket at the back."

Cowboy Church of Brenham is one of 175 BGCT congregations that focus on reaching people involved in the western-heritage culture.

A lack of giving hasn't been an issue for cowboy churches. Westbrook said they tell their congregation how to give, and if they want to give tithes and offerings, it's between them and God.

Cowboys churches affiliated with the BGCT contributed about \$400,000 to Texas Baptist causes last year, Higgs noted.

Other characteristics of cowboy churches are easy-to-understand sermons with relevant illustrations, western culture-related church events and more accessible music—either popular country tunes with rewritten lyrics or countrified hymns.

These efforts to reach a formerly unchurched population have proved that the fields are ripe for the harvest.

"The average Texas Baptist church baptizes 10 people per year," Higgs said. "Western-heritage churches baptize 26 per year. Eighty percent of our baptisms are adults. Eighty percent of those adults are men."

Cowboy church activities revolve around the arena, with events like team roping, barrel racing, ranch rodeos or play days for families with children.

"We're event-driven," Higgs said. "That's how we do outreach."

What sets cowboy churches apart the most, though, is a welcoming and nonjudgmental atmosphere. Cowboy Church of Brenham sends first-time visitors home with a small loaf of homemade bread.

"What people like about the church is yes, they like the music, they like the sermons because the sermons are down to earth and not long, but the thing they really like is the feeling they get when they come that other people care about them," Westbrook said.

Cowboy Church of Brenham meets at the Washington County fairgrounds. For more information, visit their [website](#). To find a cowboy church, visit the [Texas Fellowship of Cowboy Churches](#) website.