

Cowboy churches a movement of God, not just a fad

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DALLAS—Last year, Texas Baptists baptized nearly 42,000 people. More than 4,000 of them had their boots on.

About 125 cowboy churches are affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. They make up about 2 percent of BGCT congregations, but they performed roughly 10 percent of the baptisms last year.

A father and his two sons bow in worship at a cowboy church service.
(Photo by John Hall/BGCT)

In the last two years, the number of BGCT-affiliated cowboy churches has nearly doubled. Within weeks of launching, many of them already are serving more than 100 people a week. On average, each cowboy church baptizes 40 people a year.

And there's plenty of room for more growth as God allows, said Charles Higgs, BGCT director of western-heritage ministries. Few cowboy churches have been started in the Panhandle or in South Texas, regions that seem ripe for cowboy congregations.

"This is not a fad," he said. "This is a movement of God. The cowboy church is a reinvention of the rural church. It's the best model for reaching the blue-collar population. Seventy percent of the baptisms were adults"

Cowboy churches attract people who haven't been in a church for decades.

Some of the people the congregations baptized had never been to church in their lives.

Leaders point to comfortable surroundings and a welcoming atmosphere as reasons unchurched people are coming to cowboy church in droves. Western-heritage worship gatherings are more like family reunions than structured services.

The fellowship is real, as members see each other Monday through Saturday at work or in town. It's only natural they'd see each other on Sundays. Everyone knows everyone else in the church. They understand each other strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes. So there's no sense in trying to pretend to be anyone but who they are, said Louis Sneed, pastor of Parker County Cowboy Church in Aledo.



A worshipper on horseback bows his head in prayer during cowboy church service at a rodeo arena. (Photo by John Hall/BGCT)

"We're reaching people who are not phony, who are not putting on an act, who are not hiding who they are," he said. "They are beer drinkers. They're good people. But they're just not fitting the lifestyle of most churches."

By meeting together, several western heritage church leaders said cowboys don't have to worry about being judged for showing up to church in dirty jeans, muddy boots and a cowboy hat. That's what other people in the church wear as well.

By removing the barriers of pretence and fear of judgment, Jeromy Connell, pastor of Heart of Texas Cowboy Church in Waco, believes people go to church to focus on their relationship with God.

"We don't care what you look like," Connell said. "We don't care if you have an Armani suit. We don't care what you drive. We don't care what neighborhood you live in. We care about your heart."

And people are finding Christ's love and responding positively to it, noted Tuffy Loftin, pastor of Cowboy Church of Lean County in Centerville. Not only are people coming to faith, they are growing in it as well.

"Once they get there and once they experience the true love of Jesus Christ in their lives ... then they go, 'We like this,'" Loftin said.