

Former bar became home to Red River Cowboy Church

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BURKBURNETT—Kerry Finley had no intention of starting a cowboy church in an empty glass-front bar and liquor store. But God had other plans.



Pastor Kerry Finley keeps his sermons brief, simple and down-to-earth, and worshippers at Red River Cowboy Church respond favorably. (BGCT PHOTO)

Driving past the empty bar one day in September, a "For Rent" sign caught Finley's eye. After pulling into the parking lot, Finley began praying. That day, he rented the building and placed an ad in the local newspaper publicizing the church that would start the next Sunday.

The first Sunday, 38 people showed up. On the third Sunday, there were 64

people. Finley's preaching focuses on transformation from the inside out—a message the church's meeting place exemplifies.

Just minutes from the Oklahoma border, people come from across the Red River and from Wichita Falls and Iowa Park to the church in Burkburnett. One man even rides his bicycle from Electra to Burkburnett—35 miles each way—every Sunday.

"God took something that was evil, and he made it good," said Finley, pastor of the Red River Cowboy Church, a congregation started with the help of gifts to missions through the Cooperative Program, Texas Baptists' primary giving channel.

The congregation reached a high of 97 people one Sunday. Seventy chairs were crammed into the small space, while children sat on the floor in front of Finley. The congregation celebrated five baptisms in a water trough. Finley asked his congregation if they were ready for a bigger space, and worshippers all replied affirmatively.

By 5 p.m. that day, Finley had another building rented. Since then, the attendance has been running in the 100s.

"I never thought about the number of people that would show up," Finley said. "It seems anything we do, the Lord just grows it."

Many of the new converts never have stepped inside a church before. Some, like Max Dula, even frequented the bar where the church met later. Now Dula works with the youth of the church.



Worshippers take notes and listen attentively during at Bible study at Red River Cowboy Church. (BGCT PHOTO)

In April, he was baptized with his father, Michael Dula, and 13-year old son, Stephen Dula.

Going through some difficult times, Max Dula was searching for guidance and decided to come to the church.

"There is a family atmosphere here," he said. "Besides my marriage and kids, it's the best thing I've ever done. There are no judgments here; come as you are."

That seems to be a resounding theme among the members, including Dula's mother, Dorothy.

She has attended Red River Cowboy Church since its first Sunday—even though she never had consistently attended a church before. But after seeing the newspaper ad, she decided to try out the cowboy church.

"I've never felt comfortable anywhere else. I love it here, and the teaching is wonderful. Everything is so down-to-earth. The people are loving and caring. It's just a special place," she said.

Debbie Kalb and her family have been a part of the church since the first Sunday. Kalb works with the young children and seeks to show them the love of Christ by teaching them to love one another and performing acts of kindness such as mowing lawns or cleaning houses.

Dick West, who was invited to the church by the Kalb family, has attended for two months after having his lawn mowed by the church.

West, a trick roper for 65 years, doesn't consider himself a cowboy—not that anyone seems to mind.

"You don't have to be a cowboy to come here. Everybody lives a different life, but here people think and pray on the same level. No differences," West said.

Finley seeks to reach the cowboy culture. For him, that means there's no Sunday school, the church only meets for an hour at a time, and he preaches short sermons.

"The method changes—how it's presented—but the message stays the same," Finley said.

Kalb believes there still is much more in store for Red River Cowboy Church.

"God has a plan to reach more people. It's all about him, not us. It's not about the number. It's about reaching more with Christ and relying on him," Kalb said.