

Snake-Handling Pentecostals Get Reality TV Show

A pair of snake-handling **Pentecostal** preachers are getting their own reality television show.

Snake Salvation is set to debut Sept. 10 on the National Geographic Channel.

The series will feature Andrew Hamblin of Tabernacle Church of God in LaFollette, Tenn., and Jamie Coots of Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name church of Middlesboro, Ky.

They are among a handful of believers in Appalachia who practice the so-called signs of the **gospel** found in Mark 16: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

Coots said the series will feature scenes from **church** services where worshippers handle snakes as well as their day-to-day struggle to live out their faith. "The main thing is for people to see that there is more to us than wanting to handle snakes," said Coots.

Coots said he welcomes the attention that the show will bring. It also gives him a chance to share his faith with a wider audience than his small congregation.

"We say we are in this to save souls," he said. "But people don't see us if they don't come into the four walls of the church."

A crew from National Geographic Television followed the two **preachers** in the fall of 2012 and the spring and summer of

2013. Sixteen episodes are planned so far, said executive producer Matthew Testa.

Testa said that because their **faith** is dangerous and illegal to practice in most states, serpent-handling congregations have been wary of the media in the past. By getting to know Coots and Hamblin, he said, viewers will get a view into a unique **religious** culture.

"We live at a time when, because of the Internet and television, we are all becoming more and more alike," he said. "To find a really distinct American subculture is incredibly rare."

Testa said the serpent-handling believers blend into the rest of society. They dress modestly—dresses for women, pants and long sleeves for men—but also shop at Wal-Mart. And both churches in the show are located in residential neighborhoods.

"This is the **church** next door," said Testa. "You could be driving right by them and have no idea that people inside are handling snakes."

The series will also feature the mix of rockabilly and **gospel** music typically found in serpent-handling congregations, which are part of the **Pentecostal** holiness tradition. Some of the songs that appear in the series were written by Coots' grandfather.

Titles of 10 episodes of the reality series are listed at the National Geographic Channel's website, including "Casting Out Demons," "Bitten in Church" and "Venom in the Vein."

One episode will cover Coots' court battle earlier this year. Officers from the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency confiscated five rattlesnakes from Coots during a January traffic stop on Interstate 40 in East Tennessee, as state law bans private citizens from owning venomous snakes.

In February, he was sentenced to a year of probation.

There's also plenty of drama—as the **pastors** and their followers deal with marriage problems, past struggles with drugs and day-to-day efforts to put food on the table.

In at least one episode, a church member is bitten by a snake, causing **worshippers** to **pray** for a **healing** rather than seeking medical care.

Coots said there's plenty in the show to get people's attention. He's glad it will finally be on the air soon and will show the power that faith can have in people's lives.

“If one person sees it and it converts them or causes them to go to a church, then it will be worth it,” he said.