

AG 'Cowboy' Churches Catching on Across America

Half a million viewers across the nation tune into RFD-TV each week to watch *Cowboy Church*, a cable program hosted by recording artist Susie McEntire and Russ Weaver, lead pastor of Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church in Egan, Texas.

The television program is a ministry of Shepherd's Valley, which Weaver opened in 1997 as the first Assemblies of God cowboy church. There are now more than 700 cowboy churches in the United States; 11 are affiliated with the Assemblies of God.

However, not everyone attending a cowboy church self-identifies as a cowboy.

"We didn't realize when we started a cowboy church the kind of boundaries it steps over to reach people," Weaver says. "In rural America, it's really working."

Weaver competed with the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association for 13 years in both calf roping and team roping. He used this close proximity as a way to minister to other contestants, securing space and time to do contextualized church services at the rodeos for only the price of his entry fee. He was commissioned by the Assemblies of God to serve as a chaplain for horse track races and rodeos during those 13 years.

Using a one-on-one discipleship model for his ministry, Weaver poured into the lives of the people around him. In 1985, Weaver traveled with Jeff Copenhaver, the 1976 world champion calf roper. The next year, Copenhaver started the first cowboy church in a bullring.

McEntire and her husband, Mark Eaton, searched for a way to minister, and were able to help start the *Cowboy Church*

television program.

Since retiring from the professional cowboy business, Weaver works full-time as a pastor of the cowboy church, and ministering through the *Cowboy Church* television show. The 30-minute program, launched in 2006, includes preaching, music and features different aspects of cowboy culture.

“The church is involved in this program, they feel like it’s their program,” Weaver says. “It adds teamwork and camaraderie to our people to be involved in the program.”

The Family Network, which is available in 60 million homes, added *Cowboy Church* to its lineup in November of last year.

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