

God Transforms Rodeo Cowboy Into Spirit-Filled Pastor

Cody Cochran grew up a cowboy, spending most of his young life on the back of a horse, enjoying the cowboy life, from roping to rodeo. He grew up with “good morals” and in church, but there wasn’t a deep commitment to relationship with Christ.

So how did this cowboy end up pastoring a church of 500 in a town of 2,200 people?

It began with a girl. There was something special about this one. When Jennifer invited Cochran to attend her Assembly of God church in Abilene, Texas, he agreed. Not long after, they decided to get married and ended up moving about 90 miles from Abilene, but would drive 55 miles one way to continue attending an AG church.

Then one day, God changed Cochran’s cowboy world. While attending a service something unexpected happened: He found himself overflowing with a passion and zeal for God that he never had before when he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Cochran recalls coming home from that service and telling Jennifer all about it. He was excited, not knowing what God had in store, but knowing it was something different. “All I know is,” he told Jennifer, “I’m not going to be an Assemblies of God pastor—especially not in Abilene.”

Six months later, as improbable as it was, Cochran was pastoring an Assemblies of God church just 30 miles north of Abilene.

Cochran was for all practical purposes, a professional cowboy—he had no formal Bible training, he had not attended college, he was not a trained public speaker, he had no experiences or training that pastors “need” to have—but there

he was in Anson, Texas, pastoring a small AG church with a provisional license issued by the North Texas District Council.

Bethel Assembly was not most pastor's—provisional or otherwise—dream job. In addition to a salary of just \$50 a week, the 28-year-old Cochran now had a church of 13 members whose average age was nearing (if not surpassing) 70, located in a community of 2,200 and whose former pastor had served for 46 years at the church. For those familiar with that kind of an environment, saying the congregation was “set in their ways” would be courteous.

Being more comfortable on a horse than behind the pulpit, Cochran admits that he and his small congregation frequently “bumped heads” as he attempted to initiate changes. During this time, he also began taking Berean Courses to become a minister and wasn't just a bi-vocational pastor (holding down another job in addition to pastor), but more like a quad-vocational pastor—having four other jobs in order to keep bills paid and food on the table.

“It was difficult,” Cochran says matter-of-factly. “I packed UPS trucks at 4:15 in the mornings, I was breaking 2-year-old broncs, I was watching over 2,200 head of cattle and I sold insurance for Farm Bureau. It was hard on Jennifer too, because as a pastor's wife of a small church, she got to do all the things nobody else wanted to do.”

As Cochran and his congregation worked on their differences, he approached his new ministry in the only way he knew how: as himself—straightforward, honest, friendly. He also decided that he shouldn't just be concerned about pastoring his church, but also be a pastor of the community.

“I'm a common guy. I worked on a ranch all my life and spent 90 percent of my time on a horse,” Cochran says. “Most people in our town drive flatbed pickups. They're absolutely sincere,

raw and real. I am a friend to all of them, the saint and the sinner.”

Cochran says that the years he spent in the saddle and making connections in the ranching and cowboy community has resulted in people checking out and then choosing to make Bethel Assembly their home church.

“A lot of our church wouldn’t feel comfortable with a suit-and-tie preacher,” Cochran says. “Our church was a cowboy church before it became popular to be one—we have real cowboys attending, where they take their hats off and put their spurs up before coming in.”

What began as a difficult situation for even the most well-trained experienced pastor has evidently been ordained by God. Cochran became a certified minister, then a licensed minister and last year he became an ordained AG minister.

The church itself has experienced nothing short of miraculous growth. “We run about 350 to 400 on Sunday mornings, and if you add in the youth and kids, it’s well over 500,” Cochran says. For a community of 2,200, that’s more than a little impressive. “Not all the folks are from Anson,” Cochran quickly points out. “We have people who drive 30-plus miles just to attend our church.”

Cochran believes the success of the church can’t be narrowed to just one thing, citing an incredible group of volunteers and staff members and the church’s ongoing efforts to bring the community together. However, he says, as a church, nothing is more important than bringing families together in Christ.

“We’re really big on family,” Cochran says. “We believe in the family unit—the Christian family unit can change the church and the church can then change the world. We have other things happening in the church—people healed, delivered, baptized—but seeing mom and dad saved and God’s transformation of their

family, that's the main thing for us."

Cochran shares a story of how a father from a well-to-do family told him he always felt God had something big for him to do with his life. "He came up to me last week and told me that he finally got it—the big thing God wanted him to do was be the best husband and best father and spiritual leader for his family."

Passing the credit for the church's success to his volunteer and staff pastors, Cochran says that the men and women who volunteer and who are on his staff have the same passion to see families come to the Lord. And, he adds, the original church members he used to butt heads with at the start of his ministry, now have become like grandparents to him. He and his staff are also actively plugging people of all ages into the ministries of the church, including the young people and children.

He also has worked diligently to bring the Anson church community together, having conducted revivals where each night, a different church pastor speaks the message. This spirit of camaraderie and cooperation has opened doors and hearts in the community and between denominations.

But Cochran isn't satisfied with keeping the church as it is. His dream for the future is to plant new AG churches in other small Texas communities, giving God the opportunity to do the same thing He's done in Anson and Bethel Assembly.

The church is also expanding its community involvement as this week it breaks ground on a new multipurpose center designed not only to house their burgeoning kids and youth programs, but offer opportunities and classes for the community.

"We want to make this center available to the community and use it to host events and classes," Cochran says.

Reflecting on the lean years, Cochran offers those moved to

help small church pastors some insightful advice.

“Just offering a kind word of encouragement can mean the world,” Cochran says. “A young man in search of a church home, offered to help put up a church sign. While we were working, he told me that where he was going to church he didn’t feel the Spirit of God moving and speaking like he did through me. It was like a revelation to me – the Spirit of God is really moving and speaking through me!”

Today, Cochran, now 40, with his wife and three children, says he no longer needs to work four jobs, the church has numerous volunteers in many different ministries, the relationship with community leaders and other community churches is strong and Bethel continues to be the genuine place of caring, friendship and God’s love that Cochran hoped it would be.

“The Lord is so good to us,” he says, his voice ringing with sincerity. “It’s humbling to me to think about it –where the church is. None of this, none, could be done without the Spirit of God and the love and support of all our volunteers. I give God all the glory.”