

THE True LIGHT

by Anne Fruge

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. John 1:9

"I have an unusual testimony," Todd Hervey, the Pastor at Circle J Cowboy Church says. "I spent most of my early years running from God."

Even though Todd was raised in the church when growing up in Hervey, Arkansas on his family's 4400 acre ranch and was baptized at an early age, he never truly surrendered his life to the Lord. Todd worked as a professional horse trainer and ranch manager from his early teenage years through college at Stephen F. Austin University where he earned a degree in agriculture business with a minor in business.

However, it was while living in Nacogdoches that things began to change for Todd. First, he met his wife, Robyn.

"I stole her and brought her home," Hervey says with a smile. Now they have been married 23 years. Robyn is a reading specialist at Redwater Elementary and they are the proud parents of Jim, Wes, Ty and Beth.

"My work has always called me away from home," Todd says. "My family has been my number one support through all the changes in our lives. I am so thankful to them."

Also, while living in Nacogdoches for school, Todd started attending church at Feronia Hill Baptist Church.

"Alcohol had consumed my life to this point," Todd says. "It just about destroyed my life and everyone around me for many years. But, when I got back in church, I felt God calling me to do ministry. I got out of the bar scene and quit drinking."

Todd had realized at a young age that he could sing, so he started to use his voice to worship in church. Todd also received invitations to lead worship at other churches, youth camps, concerts and

revivals. After this, Todd and Robin moved back to Texarkana where Todd got a job at Humco Pharmaceuticals, and they began attending Trinity Baptist Church. At age 29, Todd was listening to the service and felt the Lord calling him again.

"I had been living a life of works. Everything was right on the outside, but everything was wrong on the inside. I was very active in church, but on my way to Hell," Todd says. "The Lord really changed my



ministry when I decided to give him control of my life. I went from a singer at regional events to a national recording artist in Christian country music."

Todd worked with Rit Records and had four #1 hits. He received recognition from the Country Gospel Music Association as Entertainer of the Year and traveled across the nation.

"I knew from early on that I wasn't an artist so that I could become a famous singer," Todd says. "God had a different plan. The music opened the door to secular venues so that I could bring God's word. I didn't just sing at churches, I did concerts at PRCA rodeos and fairgrounds. People kept saying, 'Let's get this crazy cowboy in here. They will listen to him.'"

Todd's Living Water Tour was his part-time work as he still worked full time at Humco. But, his travels really showed him the details of church ministry across the country, and he started to feel a calling to help the church reach out to the "unchurched" population.

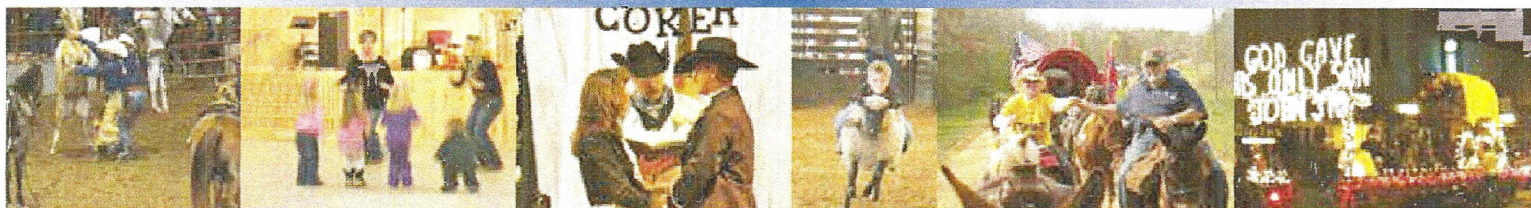
"When we looked at the numbers of decisions made from Living Water Tour, we found that 80% of the decisions came from outside the church and only 20% from within," Todd says. "We saw a need in the unchurched western heritage culture. I would give the names of those who made decisions for the Lord to the local pastors, but this culture just didn't relate to the traditional church."

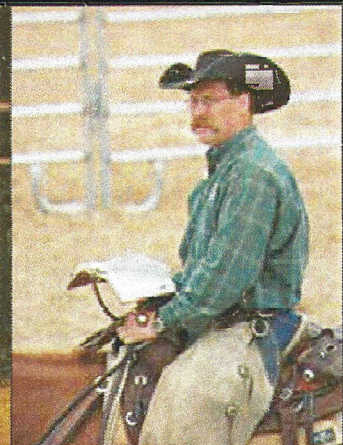
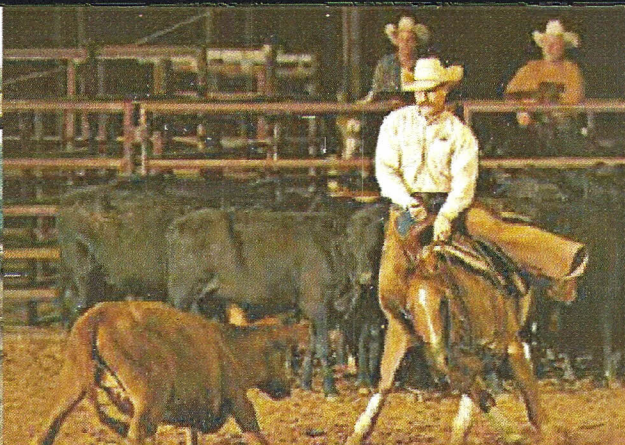
As a "cowboy evangelist," Todd was soon asked to be on the advisory board that the Baptist General Convention of Texas set up to start "cowboy" churches across the state.

"We identified several barriers that the unchurched western heritage population had with traditional churches," Todd says. "Things like fancy buildings, a traditional dress code, feeling pressure to give money in the offering, worship music they didn't know and long-winded preaching were keeping a large group of people from coming to church."

The cowboy churches were constructed with these barriers in mind. The buildings are rustic, there is no dress code, offering boxes are located at the back of the church, the worship music is centered around country music and old hymns, and pastors use more parables and examples to show life application to the Word.

"People come to this church with face paint still on from the duck or deer hunting, flip flops and shorts, camo, or even mud on their jeans from work at the ranch,"





Todd says. "In fact, after church people are often gathered in the parking lot comparing the trophies from this morning's hunt. But, 85% of the population of our church didn't transfer their letter from another church. These members are those who have never felt comfortable in a traditional church."

Ellis County Cowboy Church, the first cowboy church was established in Waxahachie, Texas, 12 years ago. Now, they have an attendance of over 2000 people. The Texas Fellowship of Cowboy Churches was formed, and then, because as Todd explains it, "You can't put a fence around God in Texas," cowboy churches spread across the south, and soon the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches was started. Today there are over 200 churches built on this model with another 30 in the making.

"God is doing this great work in our country," Todd says. "He's blessed the Biblical model of the church like the ones Paul used to reach the Gentiles, church for the unchurched."

During the time Todd was serving on the advisory board, he had also started working as a music minister at First Baptist Church Wake Village. Todd and his family felt at home in the church, especially since they still supported Todd's traveling ministry on the weekends, but soon, Todd and Robin felt like they were being called away from the church.

"This was such a hard decision," Todd says. "This is an incredible church. The people are just amazing, and they really supported my family. They had a great youth and children's ministry; this is the kind of church you want to raise your family in."

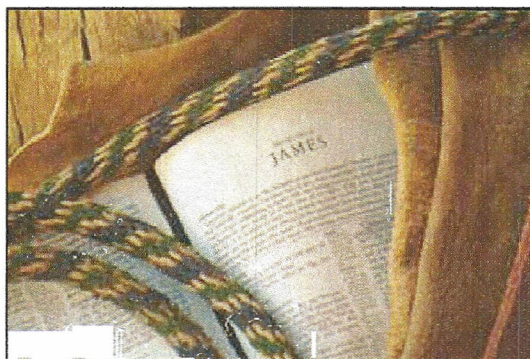
First Baptist Church Wake Village along with Cross Trails Cowboy Church in Fairly, Texas, the Texas Fellowship of Cowboy Churches and the Baptist General Convention of Texas, wanted to start a cowboy church in Texarkana and asked Todd to start as an interim pastor.

"I was looking hard for a pastor," Todd says with a laugh, "but then I realized God was calling me here. Now, I'm having a

ball."

In the seven years Todd has been pastor of the Circle J Cowboy Church, they have baptized over 380 people in a horse trough, sent out six pastors and started three mission churches.

"We are commanded in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 to go out and make disciples. I just want to be a good shepherd to the herd God has brought to this



church," Todd says.

In order to reach disciples, the Cowboy church hosts outreach opportunities every week at their covered arena. The events include ranch rodeos, ranch cuttings, ranch sortings, team ropings, barrel racing, ranch versatility classes, bull riding, and lots of events for kids.

"We share the message at every event," Todd says. "Some of these people will come to a rodeo, but are afraid of the church. Once they come here, we hope they see the building, meet our members and think, 'Maybe I will show up on Sunday.'"

The church also offers a church service at 10:30 Sunday morning and a service at 6:30 on Wednesdays including a session for youth called "Rip, Jump and Snort" and a session for children, or "Little Buckaroos." Another fellowship option includes the Round Pen meetings where groups meet across 7 different counties at various ranches, barns or workshops to

fellowship and study the Word.

"We found that many people are intimidated by being invited to a Bible study," Todd says. "So, we promise that we won't ask anyone to pray, read the Bible or put them on the spot to ask questions. Instead, we try to someone who had never been to church feel safe and welcome."

Also, the church has developed their website, with help from Don Walker at Creative Edits. Visitors to the website can listen to messages, watch videos, audio messages, and study any topic at their own pace.

"My eyes are being opened to how God uses media to reach people," Todd says. "One of our members was having a really hard time in his life. He drove out to the lake and listened to messages online for four hours straight and accepted Jesus that day in his car. He found God through our website. We don't know how many more people this tool has helped."

The church is currently hoping to expand their outdoor arena to become a multipurpose and education center with several climate-controlled rooms. Todd hopes it becomes the "biggest youth hangout on Wednesday night in region."

"We are hoping to start up a youth ranch rodeo practice," Todd says. "Seasoned cowboys will be teaching young people and children roping and ranch skills, as well as building relationships with these kids. They will share how they surrendered their life to Christ and how He changed their lives."

Todd is praying that God will provide financial means to achieve their goals to expand this building as it will serve as another opportunity to reach young people and kids in the region. Todd also hopes that one day the church will be debt-free so that they can focus more on discipleship and mentoring of other young men called into the ministry.

"I get to meet with every person who comes to know the Lord as a part of this great church," Todd says. "I love to see them grow spiritually and see where God leads them. God changes lives and seeing that happen right here in our community is the best part of my job."