

Interview with Pastor Stan Norman, New Trail Fellowship

**Interviewer:** Haley Claxton (**HC**), University of Kansas, Dept. of Religious Studies Intern

**Interviewee:** Stan Norman (SN), Pastor of New Trail Fellowship

**Location:** La Fiesta Mexican Restaurant in Abilene, Kansas

**Date:** July 12, 2015

**Time:** 12:15 PM

**Length:** 00:09:46 (Part 1), 00:36:00 (Part 2)

**Transcriber:** Haley Claxton

**Abstract:** Oral history interview with Stan Norman conducted by Haley Claxton at on June 28, 2015. This interview features Pastor Stan Norman of New Trail Fellowship in Abilene, Kansas. Pastor Norman discusses the start of New Trail in Abilene, Kansas, the elements of Cowboy Church compared to traditional church, theological and political views of his church, and the future of New Trail's ministries. This interview was conducted for the Religion in Kansas Project as part of a summer fieldwork internship funded by the Friends of the Department of Religious Studies.

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**HC:** This is Haley Claxton with Pastor Stan Norman from the New Trail Fellowship in Abilene, Kansas. Before we get to talking about your ministry, I want to ask you a little bit about yourself.

**SN:** Okay.

**HC:** Where are you from originally?

**SN:** Most of my life was Abilene,<sup>1</sup> really. I was born in Herrington,<sup>2</sup> and then at the age of four we moved to Abilene. 1960. Was raised here, and then went to college in

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<sup>1</sup> Abilene, Kansas.

<sup>2</sup> Herrington, Kansas.

Olathe,<sup>3</sup> then did post-graduate work at Port Laurent, then ended up in Oklahoma, pastoring for ten years there, then pastoring here the last twenty-two years in Kansas.

**HC:** Where did you go to college in Olathe?<sup>4</sup>

**SN:** I went to Olathe MidAmerica Nazarene—now it’s MidAmerica Nazarene University, but in those days it was MidAmerica Nazarene College. We call it “manure” now as opposed to “mink.” [laughter]

**HC:** So what was kind of your path from there, and what brought you back here?

**SN:** Well, really—I didn’t plan to come back here because the church that I came to pastor here was the last church I would’ve ever wanted to pastor because it had been a difficult church historically. In fact, the time we were considering, when we were in Oklahoma, and I felt God was calling me away from there, even though I loved it there. We found—there was two new church plantings, one was in Middleton, Colorado, which would’ve been interesting because our son would’ve been gone to Columbine High School at the time of the Columbine shooting, and then here. And my wife kept saying, every time we talked about Abilene,<sup>5</sup> I lit up. Even though I knew the church and the problems, I immediately knew I needed to come here but as far as I knew, God led us to come pastor that church for thirteen and a half years before starting New Trail.

**HC:** So, were you raised in the church?

**SN:** Oh yeah. I was a preacher’s kid, a “P.K.” kid. So yeah, I was—all my life—I was a preacher’s kid.

**HC:** And what kind of church?

**SN:** In the Brethren of Christ Church denomination, which we are at New Trails a part of. But they don’t know what the Cowboy Church in the Brethren of Christ Church is. It’s

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<sup>3</sup> Olathe, Kansas.

<sup>4</sup> Olathe, Kansas.

<sup>5</sup> Abilene, Kansas.

up to us because we're the only one of our kind. Well, there's two of us, because they have one in California and so—I was—yeah, Brethren in Christ Church and my father pastored the southern part of Dixon County here, about thirty miles south of Abilene, but we lived in Abilene all those years.

[00:02:17]

**HC:** So what made you say, “I wanna start a Cowboy Church here?” Or was it you? Did somebody approach you?

**SN:** Nobody approached me. In 2001, I was counseling a gentleman who was a member of the rodeo board here, the big Wild Bill Hickock Rodeo Board<sup>6</sup> here? Ya know, Abilene's got one of the bigger rodeos here in the circuit now. And what happened was, I was counseling this gentleman whose marriage was falling apart over a noon meal and I said—I'm familiar with Cowboys in Christ and stuff and I've always had a heart for Cowboy culture. I said, “Do they have a chaplain?” Such as like a rodeo chaplain. He didn't know. He didn't have a church background, so he didn't know. So what happened is I didn't say anything more, and about two months later he calls me, and the first thing on the phone he says to me is, “You're it.” And I said, “What do you mean, Mike, I'm it?” He said, “I had gone to the rodeo committee about a chaplain and they liked it and they want you to be the chaplain.” But I said, “But I haven't shared what I could do, what I would do, if they would approve it.” So he said, “Come to the mid-year banquet, because it's for the sponsors.” And so what I did is I went, and—now, get this. In Western Oklahoma, I did wear a couple jeans but I didn't like jeans when I was younger because I was scared I was gonna—I have skin allergies and it would bother me a lot—but anyway. So I got myself a pair of jeans, a shirt, and I had boots because I wore them in the past in Oklahoma. Well, little did I know I was gonna become on the committee that night. I was officiated and what I did was at this big banquet, which had about two hundred people, I actually prayed the meal.

Following the meal I had this—and so, there began my journey in the rodeo community, and so, in fact, that first rodeo in August, I had told them I could do one of four or five things. One, pray before each rodeo. Two, if a cowboy gets hurt, I can go to the hospital with him, because you know, all the gals and guys, guess what? They're on the road by themselves or maybe a couple, three others, and sometimes they need some help. And I thought, third, perish the thought, if there was a death, I could be there to help work the details. And fourth—there was a fifth, but I can't remember what it is—but the fourth is, if it could work out, I would do a Cowboy service beforehand. That really hasn't worked out very much because it's just hard because we're just flowing in and it's hard to do that and plus I have—my job description has me doing other PR things. So, anyway, they went for it right away. But the first rodeo, a young man I had

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<sup>6</sup> Annual rodeo in Abilene, Kansas. For more information, see: <http://www.wildbillhickokrodeo.com/>

not seen since he was ten years old—he was twenty-five at the time—his Brethren preached at my church in Oklahoma when his Brethren was fourteen years old—and I saw him on line up. And I saw him, and while we were making contact for the first time in fifteen years, this other cowboy, who was Rookie of the Year in PRCA,<sup>7</sup> got hurt badly. Got stomped on, lacerated his liver, punctured lungs, even with a flak jacket on. What happened is the committee's yellin' at me, because I'm still talkin' to my friend, and they're going, "We need you out here!"

Well, I ended up going to the hospital and, turns out this young man's girlfriend—I knew her dad, I knew her cousin from old Western Oklahoma. And of course, if you notice anything about the rodeo world, it's a very tight world. Everybody knows everybody, to some degree. And so what happened is I proceeded to—in the journey of this whole thing, what happened is I helped this young man up and we figured we was gonna have to life flight him. We took him to Salina by ambulance, and so and so. Anyways, what happens is these are the kind of things that start to cement things in my heart and bring me here, but I didn't go for a long time because I was still in the traditional church pastoring. And they could not understand, because the committees that were meeting were meeting like in the Elks Club, where they served alcohol, and this church was so conservative, "What were you doing there?" And I thought, "What would Jesus do?" He'd go to those places. Whether I agreed in their drinking habits or not, fact is, Jesus never judged them for it. He spoke to 'em and loved 'em, and it was hard for my traditional church to see that and understand that. That's not being mean; that's just the reality.

As time went along, other things developed. And, one of those is a guy, a friend of mine, who has been an associate pastor at my church in Salina, felt called maybe to start a Western church, whatever that meant. And, also at that time, we had one of our bishops over us, and our bishop—this is like a pastor of our pastors—he said, "Maybe, Stan—maybe you oughta start a Western church." He's from Southern Cal,<sup>8</sup> so what does he know? And, long story short, I went with this other guy and he showed me the building in Salina that he thought he wanted to start in. He never got going on anything. He just kept talking about it. Eventually he came to me, a few months later, he was concerned about his wife, what happened to her, physically because of a whole bunch of things, and so I said, "Probably the best thing to do," I said, "apart from loving the Lord and serving the Lord, what's the next responsibility?" He said, "Well, take care of my wife." I kind of looked at him with that "okay, you got to understand that." Finally, the second time I asked him, finally he realized God was saying no maybe right now to starting the church. And I want you to know, a few months before, I struggled with this. I thought, by this time God was making me think, this stuff was kind of a church. And I had to go through an attitude adjustment with the Lord, me praying about this going "Lord, if my friend Bob's not meant to start this, that's okay." By this time, my heart was stirring on this thing, especially when I saw that building in Salina. But God didn't call me to Salina. Abilene's got more of the Western history. The Chisholm Trail ended here. We're not as "cowboy" here as you are, I'd like to say, in southeast Kansas or for sure

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<sup>7</sup> Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association. For more information, see: <http://www.prorodeo.com/>

<sup>8</sup> California.

Oklahoma and Texas, ya know, but there was an interest there, so, and so when Bob backed away and said, “Okay, I guess I’m not supposed to start this right now,” it was like, God said to me right there, as clearly as if you’d said to me, “Tell him what your heart is.” So I said to Bob, I said, “Your vision’s not lost. That’s where my heart is.” And he said “Well, you go for it then.” And so, the next day, and I was chairman of planning for this church conference, and we’d started several churches and I really have poorly written up—I wasn’t prepared to talk to a committee about starting a church. And they said, “Come back in January.” And—<sup>9</sup>

[00:09:46]

[End of Recording, Part 1]

[Start of Recording, Part 2]

And, so what happened is that, things begin to progress, and in January, I submitted a very complete, with a timeline type of things, and they approved it, with a budget. A lot of Cowboy Churches—do not. They start just cold turkey. And our denomination put 35,000 the first year behind us which was helpful. It really was. Part of it was our salary, part of it was 5,000 for start up, for advertising, which we used on radio, country radio, *Grass and Grain*,<sup>10</sup> a couple of other periodicals as well. Things that would definitely hit the cultures. And actually, we used all the country stations. So what we did was in February of 2007—was when we started a small group in our home, and then eventually in June, we moved to the barn where we would start. We just did Sunday evening Bible studies, that sort of thing, which is interesting. The first—before we moved to the barn, our bishop here was visiting—you’ll love this story because it’s unique. We had set up already with a platform in the corner with wagon wheels. Everything very rustic looking. And, so, I decided to do communion that Sunday—Saturday. That Saturday night. And I looked over as I’m passing the elements. I looked up, and I went, “What’s that—this guy walking across the barn for?” Well he had looked at the wagon wheel up by the platform. He saw an extra spoke. But it was moving. As I looked up, as I was passing the elements, because he came back by, he had a big black snake wrapped around his leg—or arm, I should say. And our bishop, who was from Southern Cal, his eyes went just like wide open. I thought “Only at a Cowboy Church could a snake—” in fact, and then the reputation got even clear to Pennsylvania, that New Trails is a snake-handling church. So anyways, at that time we had the Bible studies. And the Bible studies got to thirty-five or so, and our projected—we had a

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<sup>9</sup> Pause was made in interview here as Pastor Norman’s young grandsons were also present at the interview. For audio of the remainder of the interview, listen to Part 2 of the mp3 files.

<sup>10</sup> An agriculture periodical. For more information, see: <https://www.grassandgrain.com/>.

practice service and we had that the Sunday of Labor Day weekend—had forty-five or so that Sunday. And the first service was going to be September 9<sup>th</sup>. And we—one of the guys who wasn't able to be at church this morning, who's on the rodeo board with me—he said, "Stan how many do you think will show up?" Because we'd been advertising. I said, "Well, I'm praying for a hundred and fifty the first service." And his jaw dropped and he said, "A hundred and fifty? I was thinking more like fifty! I'd be happy with that!" And about twenty-five after—there was about forty people—and I am kinda feelin' discouraged, and I'm sitting there thinking, "Okay Lord, if this is what we're starting with—" but then I stepped back into a corner, where there was some bales of hay. I had to get off my pity party, so I started praying. I said, "Okay, Lord. If this is what you want, we'll start with forty people. By twenty 'til, we were looking to cram people into this room. It was a calf birthing room, whole barn. You could actually look out the slats. And so—so what happened is we had a hundred and thirty-five the first service. And we have been through a lot—and I'll go into more here as asked questions—but, we had a good start off. And we never did go back to—you know they say after the first Sunday, you can expect fifty percent of what you start? We went back to about seventy-five percent of what we started with. Now, we've we had problems in the process that kind of hurt us in our numbers in the last year, year and a half. But, we'll talk more about that later. So anyway, there's the journey. Long story.

[00:04:27]

**HC:** So, I guess, what defines Cowboy Church? Ya know, what makes it different, and what makes it the same as other churches? How does it compare?

**SN:** Different, number one, almost invariably: definitely the environment. You know, for us, we literally started in a wood slat barn. So that's a different environment. A lot of Cowboy Churches started in sale barns—they start in sale barns, and you're familiar with one church started in a tent. They start all sort of places. Some places they do it in the trees, Texas and places like that. So ya know what makes it different? Number one: the locale. Number two: the simplicity of it, in a sense it's geared- even though sometimes it's been its own drawback- it's geared to, ya know, the horse world. That rough stock. Ya, it's okay if you come with cow poo or horse poo on the boots. It's just—people come simply as they are and it relates. You know a lot of people say, "Well, does the preacher have to preach 'Cowboy-ese?'" No, ya don't, ya know? I often times use illustrations from our world, but the bottom line is, I've been to other Cowboy Churches and no reference at all to the cowboy culture, just the fact is its environment, it's what they do with the ropings. Ya know, when we get our arena built, people will come. They can come rope, practice roping. We'll have events there. That fits our culture. We could even do it—because it's more expensive—but we could do buck outs,<sup>11</sup> and—buck

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<sup>11</sup> Bull riding event.

outs? Do you know what those are? Did they explain that? I want to make sure you know what those are. But that's one of the more costly ways, because having bulls in costs a lot of money, whereas roping is cheap. You bring your own horse, you bring your own rope, you bring your own saddles, and everything else. So, what makes it different are those kind of elements. And I like—like traditional church—I'll put it this way. Anything can become a pattern. That's not always good. I'll just say about the Cowboy Church, is one of the problems with the Cowboy Church is sometimes cowboys are emphasized more than Jesus, because that makes it almost like, okay. We're Cowboy Church, so we're all about cowboys. Really, we should be all about Jesus first, and then cowboys, but that's just a danger there. And so that can be just like traditional churches. They get caught in their own patterns, their own ways of thinking, that are very—“we haven't done it that way before.” Or—they get an attitude like “we're not gonna do it that way before.” But really, it might not be all that bad of the thing, depending on what comes from traditions. But the problem is a lot of people come in from traditional churches, think it should be the same way. Sorry, we don't do it that way. We do things structured different—Cowboy Churches focus more on lay pastors, and a lot of them are elders. We had elders but we went through some things that weren't a real positive experience. It's not because the individuals but because of somebody else. But we have lay pastors, who do help with ministry, and really help me as a pastor, and a lot of Cowboy Churches do that, so that's what you won't see at a lot of churches. I can say more, but go ahead.

[00:08:21]

**HC:** So you mentioned kind of molding how you talk to people into a certain way. How do you translate the Bible, that can be really complex, into what your congregation will understand?

**SN:** I think, number one: you really need to look at the whole Bible. The Bible is pretty much based on economics. It really is. It's of the earth. You look at all your characters. They were farmers, shepherds, yes—some cattlemen but not as much as you find shepherds—but it's very agronomic in the sense of its understanding. So, it really isn't that hard to translate into that. Yeah there are principles, like you read Romans, that Paul wrote. It's a theological treatise. That takes more work. But, at the same time, you can't let the culture dictate everything. The Bible dictates culture, always has, even though people don't think so, but it has. So therefore, you have to let the Bible speak for what the Bible says, because when you look at the Bible God inspired these people to write, there's a reason it was written, to speak to a specific point and to their culture. And the principles cross anything, whether it's cowboys, whether it's engineers, whatever. And so, I think—I don't work overtime to try to make it “cowboy.” I just don't. I don't think it's right or fair. But I will try to make it applicable because everybody has the same needs. We're all born, we're all hurt, we all have joys, we all have fears, we all

have uncertainties, we all have certainty of death, unless Jesus comes first. Bottom line is this. Guess what? That isn't to do with anybody else. Everybody, whatever culture, whatever background. So the bottom line itself is that it's something that can be really easy fit because if it's—case in point. One of the old cowboys who was just was buried three weeks ago—one thing he did, he goes—when he started coming to New Trails years ago—he goes, “Is there anything in the Bible about horses?” I said, “Sure is man. Let's go back in the book of Revelations. It says Jesus will come on a great white horse, and it's all about the Four Horsemen speaking about things we ought to fear because it has to do with famine, pestilence, and starving and all this stuff.” I said, “But they refer to these riders on a horse.” But then you read the book of Job. I just got through reading the book of Job. It talks about the horse and its mightiness and strength and it's all there. And immediately he connected. In fact, I've done two or three funerals—one was an older gentleman, one was a young man who took his life—he was a roper. But I can take the Bible—and I mean we had this out in an open arena where I used to have churches in the beef show barn arena out at the fairgrounds. And the place was packed both times. And I preached right out of the Bible, what the horse is like. And God's character is like the horse. We can lean on him when a—I talked about how when we have fear, the horse, if it's trained well, will take us where we want to go, sometimes despite us, because it knows the power, it knows where it's supposed to go. It knows the power because it's been trained well. And I said, “That's what God is to us. He takes us where we need to go. God, because he's trained, because he's God, but his character's like that. He's relate to—you take the Bible and you can relate to—now I'm not here to talk about my message this morning, and obviously I talked and used more fishing analogies. But you know, every cowboy has fished. Everyone understood the fishing analogy. They got a hold of it. But it's basically how you tell the story and then take—don't misconstrue the Scripture or take it out of context, but put it within the context, the culture, and it fits. I can say a lot more, but that's, I think, enough.

[00:12:38]

**HC:** So you mentioned that you used to do church in a sale barn. How did you get into the facility you're in now?

**SN:** Well we went from the barn, you could see out the slats. And we knew winter was coming and I want you to know, one side of the barn was open and even if you put a big tarp over it, we were still gonna get cold in there. So what we did is—it was interesting. In November, especially the last few weeks, it got down in the twenties and thirties, but every weekend it was up in the sixties and seventies and it was like, “Great!” But then we found a place, which was a church camp, west of Abilene here. They have a little old church building, so what happened is, they said “Come use it.” And so we said, “Sure!” Because they use it more in the summer time. Well, the Sunday before we moved there, the Lord let us know what it was going to be like if we didn't move. It was stinkin' cold



that Sunday! It was like twenties and thirties, ya know? And we're bundled up, and—but we moved so we were there for the winter out there. Nice facilities, crowded, but it was good. And we moved from there, because I thought, "Where are we gonna go when it comes summertime, because they're gonna use the camp?" And I said, "Why don't we use the beef show barn, at the fairgrounds?" They've got a three-fourths roof—I mean it's all roofed but down the side, and it was ideal. People loved it. It was non-threatening. Very open area. People could come and go, and our attendance there was around hundred ten, hundred twenty, or so. And then for the winter we just went into Sterl Hall, which is part of the thing there, and then we came back out and went to another show barn. And then we moved, six years ago Father's Day. To where we're living now off Flag Road, and there was the barn. A steel barn. And I said, "Wonder if the landlord will let us use this." Wasn't heated. Wasn't insulated. And so I talked to him and he said, "Yeah!" Before I even got very far, he said "Use it!" So guess what? We used it and, long story short, we insulated it, put the heat in it, put in the "air-conditioning"—as you could see we open the two big doors and we've got air conditioning if there's air moving, unlike today. So that's how we got there. Simple as that.

Now, I'll show you in a little bit the land where we'll build and that will be a permanent home. And we're gonna call it the Ranch House, by the way. You know why? Because if you know anything about ranching, you know here's the bunk house, where the ranchers stayed, but the man who owned the ranch house—the men would come to the ranch house to get the instructions and then went out, maybe two, three, four weeks at a time, depending on the size of the spread. And I said that's spiritually what it's like too. Call it the Ranch House to equip people to go out and do the job and stay in the "line shacks" of life, because the old cowboys used to have "line shacks" that they stayed out of. If—if you take 300,000 acres, and you're out there on horseback, no trucks, you stay out in line shacks, you're checking cattle, you're taking care of the cattle, sometimes you bring them back closer to the main house, because the house men will watch them for the winter. It's the same way spiritually. We are going out—preparing people to go out—into the ranch of the world to teach people of Christ. Simple as that.

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**HC:** So, how big is your congregation now, or on an average Sunday?

**SN:** Okay. right now—this year—we went through a real tough time this last year and a half. I'll say—just what needs to be said. We had some individuals that caused a great deal of distress. And I went through some things personally, in my life—I was going through a lot. And it was a fine time—our church was growing and growing and reaching new people, but there was a spirit that wasn't really healthy, attitude wise, and, I see it

now. I didn't really see it there. And I'll be honest with you—I was feeling a lot of arrogance and pride, because, I mean, everybody knew about New Trail, far and wide. I mean, we had people from two, two and a half hours away talking about New Trail. They'd heard of it. Well you know, what does your attitude start to be like? "Oh, everybody's heard of New Trail." Well, that—was setting us up for a big fall. And we had some people that caused a lot of dissension and problems. I didn't do everything right. I wasn't really where I should've been emotionally at the time, and spiritually. And we had people leave the church big time. So, right now, when everybody gets back, we'll probably get up around seventy, eighty again. We took a big hit. But it's okay. Because it makes us focus on what's priority: our attitudes, our hearts before God, because what happens is we were caught up, again, more in the cowboy thing—and the group that broke away and is trying to do their thing is—but it's more about being cowboy. And I'm going, "That's not what's important." They try to do everything cowboy. But this year, I took it and put a moratorium on everything in this 2015 year. We're gonna heal, allow God to heal us, let the Word of God speak to us, help people grow, and then we'll start focusing—then of course, I preached a little bit this morning of what our vision statement is at New Trail, as you heard. And so, and that vision statement is gonna dictate again—

See, Cowboy Churches can get really busy. I have friends who are cowboy churches and they are really busy. Well, a lot of that business is run by the same people. Well you see somewhere, you're gonna have burnout. And just because you have rodeos, or you want to do this, and we did a lot of things that were not bad, in and of themselves, but they weren't good, because they took us off of Jesus. It was more on—we're doing these events, events, events, events. Well, like the traditional church. We were big into programs, but see, God doesn't care about programs. He cares about people. Ya know? And when you make the program the important thing, like you and I were talking earlier, ya know about when people see one little glitch? Well they're more caught up in the program because they're worried about the program didn't work the way it's supposed to. There's a glitch in it, which, it doesn't matter. The problem is it's about people. God cares about people. He doesn't care about programs. I think in Cowboy Church we've done a lot of the same things, always dealing with our culture. We gotta be involved in rodeos, we gotta be involved in roping, we gotta be involved in barrel racing—and those are things that are important because those are things we want to do to outreach. That's part of why Cowboy Churches need an arena, because an arena is part of your outreach tool. Ya know, because we want to have a lot of people. When we build our arena, even if it's just right now—we were planning to enclose it by the way, and we still will probably, but right now we'll build outward and let people come and use it, but every time it's used, there'll be a devotional time from God's Word. It's God's property. But, cowboy's unique in a sense that the Bible says we're to go into all the world, but we also need to realize people came *to* Jesus. Well, it's a both and in our culture, because the arena brings people in too, because we can host a Northeast Kansas Horse Association deal, we can host a roping event, a barrel racing event, and if we enclose it, we're talking—we're looking, we don't know what we'll do yet—but if we enclose, we'll do it with some of that vinyl, which is cheaper, cooler, and hotter—cooler in the summertime, hotter in the wintertime. Plus, you save on lighting during the day because you don't have to put lighting in. So, I think maybe I

diverted a little bit off the point but I think I've still got the answer there. That's what—you know, when you realize you've really got to stay focused on what's called "mindful thinking," and main thing is people for Jesus Christ, having reached them but—don't let the culture dictate it. Does that make sense? Yeah.

[00:20:58]

**HC:** So, what about this area made it ideal for this kind of church, do you think?

**SN:** Well, some people think it's real stupid here, you know, really did, because Abilene's kind of a—well, it's a very political town, because of Eisenhower being from here—and even up to the last few years, a few years ago, Marvin Fitzwater. He was press secretary for Reagan and Bush, so Abilene—he's from Abilene. So, Abilene's very political oriented, and that's not a bad thing in and of itself. So it's kind of political, artsy town—it tries to be an artsy town. But I think there's been a move back towards that and I think New Trail may have helped with that a little bit, but the bottom line is, it is the end of the Chisholm Trail, which is definitely a cowboy, cultural thing, because, in here, a million and a half head of cattle or more were boarded here, sent to markets east, so that was really of significance. So it was here, wasn't long after that—you'll find this interesting—The Brethren in Christ, which we're part of—three hundred people sold their farms in Lancaster—Franklin County, Pennsylvania in 1879, moved lock, stock, and barrel out here, and built a building north of the courthouse that their families, all of their families, could live in until they got their land bought and established as well, north and south of the Smokey River, and they were called River Brethren Men. And what they did was came out here—and the movement of those people there—and I think it was happening before then—some of those Chisholm Trails moved to Ellsworth, (Kansas,) and out west – but what happened was, you had this culture. You had Bobby Hickock<sup>12</sup> here, Tom Smith,<sup>13</sup> who helped to clean up Abilene along with Brethrens in Christ—he did the rest of it. He was a boxer who used his gun. So there's still this underlying historical Western mindset here in Abilene. Of course, in the movies, Abilene was known as the wildest—you know, it used to be called Sin City, USA in Abilene, way back in those times. So why? Very simple. There's a cultural base here, not like—not as predominately cowboy as it would be in Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, those areas, and Colorado. And it's here. And also, it appeals to those who are the farmers, stockmen, ya know, they like it. They may not be cowboy, but ya know, even farmers like to wear a cowboy hat and so on. It's kind of part of them. It's not that far removed from what they do and what a cowboy is, so to speak. Even though their acreage might not be several thousands, it may be just a few hundred. Does that make sense? Does that help?

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<sup>12</sup> "Wild Bill" Hickock, gunfighter in the early 1870s.

<sup>13</sup> Abilene, Kansas, marshal from 1869-1870, credited with cleaning up crime in Abilene.

**HC:** Definitely! So you mentioned that the area was kind of political. There is a lot going on right now in politics regarding Christianity as a whole. Does your church have any stance on any of that?

**SN:** Oh yeah.

**HC:** Or do they shy away from it?

**SN:** No. Obviously you are talking about the recent Supreme Court decision.<sup>14</sup> Might as well just go for it. The Brethren in Christ Church has a statement on it that's very clear. Obviously, we're to love those individuals who practice an alternative lifestyle. Love them because God calls us to. The problem is, the Christian church hasn't been very loving about it. That's the problem. Loving does not mean accepting behavior. I love my kids, but I didn't accept always their behavior and I had to discipline them. It's the same way spiritually, whether we want to believe it or not. It is. So—the Brethren in Christ Church—let me speak to the denomination I'm a part of. They made a very clear statement that it is—marriage is between a husband—a man and a woman. They will not allow anything of our properties to be used for marriage, and they do not allow us as pastors to do it. It is my own personal conviction too, Biblically, and I, I would not, even though I—it has been brought to my attention that somebody is gonna approach me to do a wedding, and the problem—I hope I can convince you a little bit in a good way, in a positive way—the problem is, we talk about developing relationships. Well, I think every person ever is struggling with any kind of issue which is sin, whether it's thieving, being a pyromaniac, whatever else. The bottom line is you have to be able to build a relationship to influence people. The problem is, this is the one sin that has become personalized. You don't read anywhere else “I'm a pyro-Christian,” “I'm a klepto-Christian,” “I am an adulterous-Christian.” We talk terms about “gay-Christian,” we say “Really, where does that stand? Does it wash Biblically? Does it stand?” But the thing about it is, if somebody were to come to me—first of all, it's my conviction, the church's conviction, my local church's conviction, that we don't endorse that.

But the thing of it is, that relationships should be built with those people. The problem is, if you say “No,” but you want to build a relationship—if you say “No,” you immediately shut off, because you've attacked—to them—you've attacked their personhood. Now, if a person—like somebody said, “Are they welcome to come to our church?” Yes, they are. I've pastored in probably what's considered the most conservative, I would call the right-wing of right-wing thinking: Western Oklahoma. But the thing about it is, what happened is, we had a gentleman who practiced that lifestyle

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<sup>14</sup> *Obergefell v. Hodges*, decided June 26, 2015, which legalized homosexual marriage across the United States.

come to church, and came to church faithfully a long time—I'd say almost a year, because then his grandma died. I did her funeral. We did Bible studies in his home, he was really struggling with this whole thing. He was open to listen. He didn't hate these people, they didn't judge him, they love him. Now, not long after I buried his grandmother, he moved to Amarillo [Texas] and immersed himself fully into that cultural background. But you know what? Our people still tried to write him letters, if they knew where he was at, write him that they loved him and cared for him. I thought, "Now, that's what true Christianity's about." That's what it's about: loving the person. They didn't approve of the sin, but they still loved him. And what I said—I was really thinking, "How's this church gonna handle it?" and they handled it really classy. And I always said they were mature Christians. They matured, handled it Biblically. They didn't approve of it, but they loved him, and saw beyond the sin, and loved like Jesus does. And Jesus loves us as sinners, but loves us too much to let us stay there. Ya know? There's a difference there.

So yes—that's where our church is at right now and we as a local church are going—we will be writing a statement of our own—but I preached two weeks ago on "How do we respond?" and I won't go on, but the fact is, I had one person say, "You had me really nervous, but I loved how you responded, how you wrote, how you preached that message." Even though they agreed, and probably had as strong of feelings about it as I did, they appreciated how I handled it. So it wasn't a matter of snarling lips and like—I'm gonna say this in quotes—like our "friends in Topeka"<sup>15</sup> would've done, ya know, which I cannot stand because that just is dead wrong. And so I think there's two sides. That's just as dead wrong Biblically, just as the other side is, I believe, Biblically wrong. Course, I believe there is a clarity of sin. A moral absolute that comes from the Lord. But at the same time, even in his absoluteness, God showed grace. Not to say it's okay, but to love those people. And that's really the problem and I like how the Brethren in Christ Church does and believes strongly in. Even though we still have some people that are saying, "Well it's this, or this, or this," but we've just got to accept them for who they are, to hold them. We accept it, but just because we accept it doesn't mean we would just take it for that. Ya know? God called for us to change them. And I used to have a friend, that used to work for the Underworld, and she was a lesbian and she always said, she argued the point about the genetically born with it. She said, "I'll give you, some things are that way. Some parts of us are"—and she was more man-ish, but not really. But she said, "Nonetheless, it's still a choice. And God calls us to make a choice." She said, "Genetically or not." And I thought, she could speak it. She was there once. And she understood that. And so, anyway, yes. We do have a stance on that, and probably in Cowboy Churches, you're gonna have a lot more, and probably in some places a lot more vocal, almost snarly. I'm goin', "Hold on. Let's be gracious about this." Does that make sense?

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<sup>15</sup> Referring to the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, known for being outspoken protesters against homosexuality in the United States.

**HC:** Yeah, yeah. So what do you see as the future for your church? You were talking about, you have land that you were planning to build on.

**SN:** Yeah—well we would've been if it wasn't for all the rain we've had, we would've had the earth work done on the whole thing. Our future is, from a building standpoint, we bought twenty acres of land, and it's paid for, that part, plus we have a 100,000, a little more, in the bank now, towards the building which we can build. We can add on as we go along if we need to. But the future of—the fact is, one of the things that's really helping us work those lands, helping us find relevance which we have some through our culture I think—but anyway, the people who are not cowboy culture and we need to find ways to identify and to meet their needs—and the needs are getting greater all the time, because of economic reasons. How do we meet those needs? Because we've asked the government to do it but nowhere in the Bible does it say the government is supposed to take care of it. The church is supposed to take care of needs and governments have proved themselves never to do to good. I'm just gonna say that bluntly. But—one of the things as a church, I want us to really refocus our vision. How do we relate more into that so we see more singularity? I call it the shotgun or the rifle way. Shotgun, you hit a lot of things. What happened in the past, we allowed ourselves to get shotgunning, and we need to come back and focus with a “Here's the actual bull's eye.” Does that make sense? So the future is to build, but the build is a really two-fold purpose. One is to train, to send out, but also it's a place for people that come to do things that are part of our culture. Like right now, where we're at, we don't have that arena, you know? And to use the arena hear costs money, you know? And, plus too, one of the things to futurize. Like some ministries—like Shallow River Ranch started out here that works with kids—troubled kids—and horses and things and they're just doing great things. And we're going to do—we're talking about doing more things together because we are just being fragmented. We are culturally part of the same culture, we're part of the same vision, just different ways of what we're doing it. Now, part of the vision is to make contact, like we work with the Cowboy Church out in Concordia. You heard the announcement this morning? We helped with the rodeo. And we've done in the past—because some problems in the past year, the other group kind of tried to overtake that from us—but that church up there, the rodeo committee, they said, “We want you back.” And that's fine. But those, how we do, to help, outreach. When we go to do something, we do it as a ministry, not just to do a performance, but we do a ministry where we can speak through Christ, speak to cowboys, have that opportunity. So, anyway, we're planning to build and it's to be a multi-faceted facility. The arena makes it really nice if we enclose it. That way we don't have to worry about those things, both coming and going. Does that make sense?

**HC:** Mmhmm. So I think that is most of the questions that I had. Is there anything else you thought of that you'd like to add?

**SN:** I'll just put it this way: Even though I was not raised in the cowboy culture—I was around it a lot. My granddad was a stockman farmer—my heart was in it. I was the kid that snuck in—you used to be able to sneak in—we'd had a rodeo here about—and I could watch the last half, which is the best half. Usually bull riding and that kind of stuff. Can't do that anymore, but God was always there. And I never realized how much he was there. And like people now, and I've had people say, "Well, you can't be a cowboy preacher because you didn't do a ranch thing. You didn't rodeo." And I said, "You look at missionaries that go to other cultures. They had to become part of that culture. To learn it." I know more about cowboy culture than most missionaries do going to a foreign country until they get there. Does that make sense? And I think part of the fact is, the Lord has given me that privilege and that opportunity. What I feel like we've done effectively is—do we want to reach out only to the cowboy culture? No, but I think it will help us—but when you have so many cultures—and I'll say this. In the cowboy culture, you have extremely, extreme, *extreme* single mindedness. It's almost like your way or the highway, which can cause a lot of distresses with people. But even though the culture might be, you're still independent minded people. That make sense? And that cause—and that's what happened to us. And I'll admit I allowed it to happen and I wish I never had, and, like somebody said, "Probably when you've been where you've been emotionally," because I had put myself in a time of depression, which I'd never thought I'd go through. And it burned me, so to speak. But God has really used it to teach me too, and to really focus on what is important and keep focused, instead of just fall out to "Let's do this, and let's do this, and let's do this." It was more—I've realized this more being a pastor—it's more about need, about making the church what it can be, about making Christ look good. Does that make sense? Well that's all I'll say for now. I could say a lot more, but I'll stop there.

**HC:** Alright, thank you.

[00:36:00]

[End of Recording, Part 2]