Interview with Pastor Terry Newell, Crossroads Cowboy Church

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

Interviewee: Terry Newell (TN), Senior Pastor of Crossroads Cowboy Church

Location: The front porch of Crossroads Cowboy Church, 1225 Oak St, Perry, KS

Date: June 24, 2015

Time: 6:30 PM

Length: 45:56

Transcriber: Haley Claxton

Abstract: Oral history interview with Terry Newell conducted by Haley Claxton at Crossroads Cowboy Church in Perry, KS on June 22, 2015. This interview features Pastor Terry Newell, Senior Pastor of Crossroads Cowboy Church. He discusses how he came to Crossroads Cowboy Church and how he defines the community. Prominent topics include discussion of youth, the fellowship of the church, the future of the church, and the incorporation of horses and other activities in the ministry of Crossroads Cowboy Church. 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: Hi, this is Haley Claxton here at Crossroads Cowboy Church in Perry, Kansas and I’m here with Pastor Terry Newell, of Crossroads Cowboy Church. Before we start talking about your ministry, let’s talk a little bit more about who you are—Where were you born?

TN: I was born in Lawrence.¹ Lived in Oskaloosa,² all my life, except for ten years I was on—in the military.

¹ Lawrence, Kansas.
² Oskaloosa, Kansas.
HC: Did you grow up in the church?

TN: Yep. Right down the street here.³

HC: Which church?

TN: The Williamstown Assembly of God.⁴

HC: And so, what brought you then from there to being a pastor?

TN: Felt called into the ministry to be a pastor. I started really in ministry in 1993, workin’ with kids, and in 2001, we decided it was time to go ahead and get my credentials as a minister. And in oh-five we went full time, so—⁵

HC: So what made you kind of go for Cowboy Church? How did all that get started here?

TN: I was the associate and youth pastor at Williamstown Assembly of God, which is that brown building right over there, and we had kind of reached a plateau, if you will, in our ministry. The church didn’t seem to be growing a lot and we had finished some construction projects and we were just kind of at a, like I said, plateau. We were just kind of there and we had talked about—I actually had applied for—several positions as Senior Pastor at other churches and felt like that’s where God wanted us. So the lead pastor over there and I had heard about the Cowboy Churches—in Texas and Oklahoma and elsewhere—and I had been involved in the Western culture all my life,

³ Gesturing toward Oak Street, the street which the church sits on.
⁴ The Williamstown Assembly of God is on the same property as Crossroads Cowboy Church. For more information, visit their webpage: http://www.williamstownag.org/.
⁵ 2005.
so riding and what have you, and so, thought it would be a good way to open another opportunity for ministry in the community.

[00:02:38]

**HC:** So, what defines Cowboy Church? How would you define it as compared to any other kind of church?

**TN:** Hmmm—Can you pause this for a minute?

**HC:** Yeah, sure.  

**TN:** I’ve been asked that a lot and I guess the best answer I can get or give is—it’s just genuine. And it’s—we’re not about carpet colors or suit colors and all of that, you know—we’ve branded it foo-foo [laughter], that you get at a lot of what you consider traditional churches. And I have nothing against that. I really don’t. But, in the Western culture, reality and—honesty are valued virtues. Ya know, you come in here, it’s dirt floors, and metal folding chairs, and it’s cold in the winter and hot in the summer, and if you’re gonna come here, you gotta want to come here and worship the Lord. It’s—and again I say, it’s not the—this isn’t for everybody. But, I guess that’s the main thing that I get from a lot of people that are part of the Church, that I would say defines the church is that it is just genuine and that people are honest and feel good. We all hit bumps in the road and make mistakes and we try to love ‘em anyway. So—

**HC:** So do you consider yourself a particular denomination of church?

**TN:** We are affiliated with the Assemblies of God. First, the Kansas district Assemblies of God, which is part of the National Assemblies of God, out of Springfield, Illinois. But—we have all different—Catholic and Baptists and Methodists—A lot of folks that come

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6 Here, a young man of the congregation came and asked Pastor Newell about how to open the gas cap on a tractor they used to prepare the arena for riding, as the night I was there was the youth riding and worship night.
here are generally either un-churched, people who don’t or haven’t gone anywhere in their life, or have been disenfranchised—with church in general. Maybe not a particular denomination.

HC: And so, why, in your opinion, would Cowboy Church appeal to those who you’d consider un-churched or kind of hurt by the “church” system?

TN: Well again, I guess it goes back to being genuine. I don’t profess to be perfect [laughter]. And I—sometimes when I say these things, I come across as being hard on traditional churches I guess—but I think to some extent that church in America as a whole has become one of two things. One: it’s this big mega-church, where people come in and you’ve got thousands of people, and it’s all about feelings and—perception I guess. Or especially in Kansas, you go down to the little rural churches where they’re fading in numbers and—I don’t know—but why do they come here? ‘Cuz we’re open and honest. We accept people the way they are. I think church and—over the years, kind of got a—got this attitude of first you believe. You believe in Christ, and you accept them as Lord and Savior, and then you become this super Christian, and then you can belong to our group, or our church, or our friendship, our relationship, our community, whatever it is. Here, we just say, “Hey! Come on and belong.” And we look at Christ. When he went out to pick out his disciples, he didn’t say, “Ya gotta stop this, and stop this, and stop this, and then do that before you can come and be my friend and follow me.” No. He said, “Come follow me.” And through following him, through living with him, they believed in him, and then they became what he was preaching and talking about. And that’s what we try to do here. Just “Come and belong.” Ya know? I’m not gonna tell you what you are doing is right. If Scripture says it’s wrong, ya know? I don’t beat around the bush. I preach the Gospel. I preach the Bible—but I’m not gonna beat you over the head and tell you you gotta change before you come in. I am gonna tell you, because I’m your pastor, and hopefully I’ll become your friend, that those things are wrong and in God’s sight they’re sin. I make that perfectly clear to—and hopefully, in my messages and in the church—but I think that’s what really draws people, ya know? We just say, “Come in—come and be part of what’s goin’ on. Come be our friend. Come and join our family and enjoy our friendship and our events and our riding,” and, ya know, from motorcycles to horses, ya know. We had an event Sunday that was open to anybody—and all of our events are—but I would say that is probably the biggest reason. All in all.
HC: I noticed—at your service, that fellowship seemed to be a very large part of the way your services, at least, were structured. Could you talk a little bit about that?

TN: It goes back to part of that—right from the very beginning—and I can’t take complete credit for that. We—we visited several other Cowboy Churches as part of our plan. I had a team of people who came with me from—the other church supported us and—Hello Tex!... Can we pause this for a minute?

HC: Sure. 7

[00:10:32]

TN: We decided right from the very beginning, and Paul talks about this from the book of Acts, that the disciples and the early Christians first started, you know they didn’t have anybody but each other, and the Bible say that they ate together, they fellowshipped together, they studied the Word together, and they worshipped together—and then he talks later on about how the Church is a body that each—each individual—each part has its part to play.8 The thing about that is, if you think about that picture—if I cut my finger off and I put it over there on the sound booth and say, “Okay finger. Take care of yourself and—you’ll be just fine,” we know what’s gonna happen. It’s gonna die and my body’s gonna be—lacking. And I believe the Church is the same say. God brings everybody in with different talents, different ideas, different—abilities. But if we’re not connected enough to know what those abilities are, to know who that individual is, to know what their struggles are, what they’re going through, then how can we function as a Church? How can we function as the body of Christ? Which is what the Church really is. It’s not a building. It’s not an arena or the sanctuary. It’s the people that are there. That’s the Church. And so, for the Church to function correctly, I believe there has to be fellowship, and so we’re very—connected. We’re very intentional about making that happen. You look again at a lot of traditional services. People come in five minutes before church and sit in, they sing the songs, they pray, they hear the sermon, and a lot of them are out the door before the pastor can get to the back door. There—how do you build connection? And there are a lot of churches doing small groups. Our sons belong

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7 Here, we paused for a moment as a member of the church rode up on his horse and asked if Pastor Terry would pray with him.
8 See 1 Corinthians 12: 1-31.
to churches in Lawrence\(^9\) that do small groups and connect each other that way, but I still think that, ya know, this small group—do they know this small group? And so, we really encourage, all the way from the youth pastor to the core group to our first encounters ministry—the people who greeted you at the door and gave you the bulletin and hopefully said, “Hey, we got coffee, sausage, bacon, biscuits.” All of those things are intentional to help people feel connected and welcome—and we want you to belong.

**HC:** I noticed that youth were a big part of your ministry too. How do you reach out to a younger demographic?

**TN:** Well—that’s a good question [laughter]. I leave it up to my youth pastor. [laughter] Yes—First off, we have a distinct advantage. I mean, horses are cool. Ya know, they attract people. Ya know, people pull in. They see horse trailers here and, “Hey, what’s goin’ on? What’re y’all doin’?” It’s family oriented. Very. But, we, when you say younger demographic; there are several younger demographics here: the young, the youth, the teenagers. Five years ago when we first started the church, I had just finished bein’ the youth pastor over there, started this church, so I took over the Senior Pastor and Youth Pastor here. But I’m fifty five years old. I don’t connect with the—as a Senior Pastor, I connect real well, as you’ve seen, which is great. But as a youth pastor, I don’t connect anymore. I realized that about forty eight, forty nine years old, that I just was not making that connection. There’s just too much age difference when they look at me like I’m their grandpa. So three years ago, we determined that we were going to seek a full time youth pastor—and God really opened the door for Brent. He came the first year and stayed for three months, did a wonderful job. He makes—he connects very well with the young people—he’s twenty-two—with the youth. He stayed for three months, did a really great job, so we got connected with Johnson University—Brent Noe, N-O-E—Johnson University in Knoxville,\(^{10}\) Tennessee, was where he was going to Bible college at. Got connected with them and set up an accredited internship last year, so he came for six months last year, did his internship, went back in December, and when he left, we offered him a full time position. So he came back in May. And—so he spends a lot of time with the youth. Ya know, outside the church, outside of youth group, he makes connections with youth and with the Western culture as well. He’s a bull fighter—which is the guys who go in and get the cowboys off the bulls. Then—so he really connects well with the Western culture. Second, for your age group, we’ve been lacking. And I’ve seen—a lot of twenty-somethings, early thirties, couples with young kids, who have come in, didn’t make the connection that we wanted, and so, I know that that’s a lacking

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\(^9\) Lawrence, Kansas.  
\(^{10}\) For more information on Johnson University, See: [http://www.johnsonu.edu/Home.aspx](http://www.johnsonu.edu/Home.aspx).
area. Brent is engaged. His fiancé is—Hannah—you might have met her—but we sat
down two weeks ago and laid out a strategy with some of our other couples who are
here to begin reaching out the ministry in that age group. Because I think there’s a lot
of—again a lot of lacking area—for your age group and for ministry—We have the older
group, we have the youth, and somehow this younger group gets swept out because
they’re always busy with kids, in school, and all of these things. But again, you need
that fellowship. You need friends. You need people you can talk to. You need that
connection and that’s what the Church should be for. So anyway—

[00:18:47]

HC: So do you think that fellowship is the most important part of worship and of church?

TN: No.

HC: Or what do you think the most important part is?

TN: The most important part of church is the Gospel, is the message of Jesus Christ.
Without that—I mean, any saddle club or 4-H or anything else, can do all the other stuff
that we do, so the most important part is the message of Christ that God has a better
plan for the rest of their lives and that to—allow him to do that, we need to know Jesus
Christ as Lord and Savior. We—the fellowship and events and everything that we do is
a—it’s like a river. The water, the fish; everything’s floating down the river. But the only
way to get to the end—for us—is to get in the boat. And we are trying to get people in
the boat. To know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

HC: So how do you translate the Gospel into, ya know, ways modern people can
understand and relate to?

TN: Well I, hopefully that is—that’s probably my greatest responsibility as a pastor. Is to
preach the Word, be true to the Gospel, be true to the Bible, and yet convey that to
people in terms and ways that they can understand. Too many times we hear—we have
a lot of folks that come here who haven’t been, haven’t ever been to church, so when I say salvation, or sanctification, or justification, or even baptism at times, or ask ’em to look up the book of—Nehemiah, or—they don’t know. And so my responsibility is to not—take away from the message, but to convey the message in such a way that people can—that God can speak through that.

HC: So how do you go about doing that?

TN: How do I go about doing that?

HC: Yeah.

TN: Lotta prayer—study, illustrations. I have a background of working with youth, and in speaking with youth, especially boys and men, there are certain ways of communicating with them that I guess I’ve learned through the years—and I do that. [laughter]—I guess I don’t know exactly what you’re asking. If that’s not the answer.

HC: No, no, that’s a good answer. So—

TN: And let me be a little bit more specific. I worked with Rural Rangers—which is a scouting ministry—for years, with the Assemblies of God. In that, as a, what they call commander or leader, we learned certain techniques for conveying things to boys specifically, and later on, as I moved up in responsibilities, I became a district training coordinator and a national instructor. You learn how to communicate with men the ideas that you want to convey through activities. Through events. If I had to define the overall ministry of the church, we’re an activity-based ministry. Through building fellowships—our mission statement—which you’ve probably seen on the bulletin—is one, “to mentor others into a relationship with Christ.” To display His grace and mercy in our daily lives and then to—develop the ministries that bring the family back to Christ. And so—so I learned how to do that through them. And mainly it’s—I use humor, to some extent—and illustrations. Anyway—
HC: You mentioned baptism earlier. How do baptisms work at this church?

TN: Okay [laughter]. This would probably be one of the most controversial issues within denominations—but my study and my belief and my teaching through the years—baptism is not a means of salvation. It is a—personal commitment, a public demonstration of that commitment, that you’ve accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and that you’re willing to—live by his Word, to do your very best to follow him and live the life that he has for all of us—So basically I guess, my first question when somebody wants to be baptized is, “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?” And, I can’t answer that. The only person who can answer that is you. Second is, “Are you willing to follow him? To study his word, which is the Bible? To try and live by the—directions that it gives?” It’s very specific about our lives. And thirdly, “Are you willing to make a public commitment of that? Are you willing to stand before this body, this group of friends and family and people who care about you, and say that—that you have accepted Christ?” That is our baptism. We submerge, which represents Christ’s death and resurrection. As you’re submersed, you’re putting to death the old man and his old sins and, Paul said too, being transformed, being renewed into a new man as you arise, in Christ.

HC: Do you also do communion?

TN: We do. Mmhmm.

HC: And how often do you do that?

TN: [laughter] Not as often as I should. We try to do it once a month. I know there are a lot of denominations who do every week, and, again, communion is a—and again that’s another area of controversy within the churches, but—To me, communion and what Jesus taught about communion is a fellowshipping together of the believers, those who know him as Lord and Savior. Anyone’s welcome to take communion. Now, I’m not going to go out and ask everyone if you’ve accepted Christ. It’s between you and God.
But when I do communion, I try and make sure that it’s—that people know what it represents. The cup represents the blood that was shed for us on the cross, and the bread represents Christ’s body that was—mangled and mutilated and eventually put to death on the cross. And it’s—I think if we do communion so often, it becomes a ritual instead of a something worth meaning—So—

**HC:** Does the music you use reflect these values, do you think? Or, talk a little bit about the music and the worship style. Especially about the music.

**TN:** Well [laughter] as you probably noticed, our music is on the Country side probably. We do use a lot of contemporary music, and old hymns. It’s kind of a mixture of both—but I would say it is—it reflects the Western culture—and you know up until just a couple weeks ago, we didn’t have a piano. All we have was guitars and then the winds and the drums. And then, Audrey and Scott started comin’. Audrey had the electric piano. I had dozens of people call me and offer pianos. First off, you can’t keep a piano in tune in here, because of the fluctuation of temperature, so it was just impractical to have a piano here. But now that she’s brought the electric in, I have no problem with it. I do encourage our young people, they’re supposed to be—I don’t know whether they’re gonna do it tonight—but they are supposed to be doing worship Wednesday nights. And then they’re going to be taking over once a month doing our Sunday morning worship. And they’ll do—and I listen to all kinds of music. Contemporary and what you’d call “Hard Rock” Christian music to Country Christian. I listen to all kinds. Always have. But—and they, in an effort to bolster our youth and encourage them in music ministry and worship, that part of worship, that they’re gonna do that. And they—and I don’t know what kind of music they do where you go, but—you know, there’s a lot of the songs. I’ll look them up right now. I know what they are. But—“Alive and Running,” “God’s Not Dead,” “In Christ Alone.”¹¹ But the contemporary stuff that’s out there now is what they enjoy and, for one, it would be hard for us, the regular worship team, to do that kind of music. So I guess what I’m saying really is worship reflects the Western culture. The Western part of our—ya know, our vision statement is “to be a place where Christ and our Western heritage live together.” Not separate. Too many people have Sunday people, and then Monday through Saturday people, and then we don’t want that. We want seven days a week Christian cowboys. We are Christians. Motorcycles. We ride the bikes—I ride horses too. Shelley doesn’t ride horses.¹²

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¹² Shelley is Pastor Newell’s wife, who was present during the interview.
HC: So what do you see as kind of the future of your church and why do you think Cowboy Church has been growing so quickly throughout the whole country? Or at least the Western part of the country?

TN: Yeah. Well for one, it appeals to the Western part of the county. I mean—and what used to be called the Bible Belt, maybe. I don’t know how far they go West. I know there’s some in Tennessee, and I guess what you’d call more the “red states,” [laughter], but that would be the first part of it is they—I believe they appeal to these people, ya know? There’s no foo-foo, there’s no—it’s just genuine. And I think that is something that people are looking for in the church today. I think for a lot of years—I think for a lot of years, that I don’t know what happened. I grew up in the church—until I was eighteen. I left. Didn’t come back until I was about thirty three. Because I always was told what I couldn’t do and what you shouldn’t do, what I— “Don’t do this and don’t do that.” But nobody ever told me what I could do. Ya know, really, I mean—this is fun. I love riding horses. I love riding motorcycles. I love being with other Christians. And so we—I think that’s what appeals to people.

HC: So I think this will be my last question. What do you see as the future of your church?

TN: Of this church? Well—Sometimes people think I’m crazy [laughter]. There’s so many opportunities out there. So many things that we could do, and in order to do them—we’re limited right now by weather. In the wintertime, there’s not many that—not everybody is dedicated as I and few others, to go riding when it is twenty degrees. We don’t do the arena stuff Wednesday nights. We still do Sundays, but we don’t do Wednesday nights because of the weather. Ya know, it’s cold to get horses out, weather’s nasty, never know when you’re gonna have to cancel. So one of our visions, or what I see for our future, is about a 300 by 500 indoor arena with an air conditioned, and heated, sanctuary [laughter]. Not what you would consider a traditional sanctuary, but basically just like what we’ve got here. But, with that we can do a lot of things year round. We have several people—that’s Brett’s fiancé, Hannah.13 They’re both certified therapeutic riding instructors that work elsewhere with therapeutic riding programs.

13 Gesturing to a woman walking past the porch.
There are several ministries, I won’t say a lot because I don’t know that—but there are several ministries out there who are working with at-risk kids. You can learn a lot from a horse. You can teach a lot with a horse. And those ministries are being very successful with working with at-risk kids, teaching responsibility, teaching trust—teaching consequences. A lot of different areas and that’s an area that we’d really like to expand into. With Pastor Brent coming back, that’s really a major goal for him—to see that moving forward. So we’ve offered to send some others through training to get certified to do that so—Just to continue to share the Gospel. That’s our big purpose.

[00:38:21]

**HC:** I think that’s all the questions I had, but if you have anything else to add, feel free. Is there anything else you’d like to add here?

**TN:** We never really finished how the Church got started did we?

**HC:** Oh no! Go ahead!

**TN:** Yeah—we had started the—we had decided to go with that so we had a planting team who went and we visited several Cowboy Churches, and ours is not representative of all but representative of those that really had an impact on us. So when we finally decided going to go ahead and do that, we actually started the church in a thirty by seventy tent on March 1st of 2009. We’ve only been here six years. It was nine degrees then. We were in that tent and had that old wood stove up at the front. There were eighteen people on our planting team—we were going to do four services without announcing that we were doing church, and, just to make sure we were, ya know—were half-way professional and knew what we were doin’. So we were gonna go through the month of March and then actually start in April. That first Sunday, word got out. We had four visitors the first Sunday. And we hadn’t even told anyone we had started a church. By the end of April, we were runnin’ around sixty and it’s just grown ever since so—But basically what you see today is what we started with is what we started with—as far as the atmosphere and relationship—I think the technical term today is community—but, that’s how we got started.
HC: About how many people are in your congregation now, would you say?

TN: On an average Sunday, we run around 150 to 160 on an average Sunday, and if everyone showed up on one Sunday, our actual attendance sheet is about 240. Our biggest service was 315.

HC: Was that a particular like holiday or special event?

TN: It was a big rodeo we did. A youth rodeo. We mainly try and stay in the youth area. When we first started the church, we did do a couple of big, major rodeos. What you call URA\textsuperscript{14} or RCA\textsuperscript{15} circuit rodeos, which are more of the professional cowboys. And they were good, they turned out well, but they didn’t accomplish what we’re set out to do, and that’s to share the Gospel and see people come into the church and so—after the second year of that, we decided, ya know, we’re not gonna do that function. We’re going to stay in the youth area. We do horse shows with the kids, a state horse show—Barney what is it?—the Kansas State Horse Show Circuit, KSHSC\textsuperscript{16} And then we belong to a small organization here in Northeast Kansas called NEKSAG, which is Northeast Kansas Small Area Horse Group,\textsuperscript{17} and we do a show with them every year and we’ve got the Kansas Barrel Racers Association\textsuperscript{18} comes in and does an event. We do an event with the Missouri Kansas Youth Rodeo Association.\textsuperscript{19} We do an event with the Christian Youth Rodeo Association.\textsuperscript{20} But primarily, everything, and all of the events that we do, where the people would come in to use our arena. We try to keep that around either family or youth because it’s—that’s just what we’re about. We run, I saw one of your questions was on demographics. We probably run sixty-five—sixty, sixty-five percent then and that’s a rarity in church today. And you probably noticed that on Sunday. It just—the Western culture, the atmosphere of the church—and we’re intentional about that as well. It took ‘em a while, a long time, to let ‘em put the flowers up front. We don’t do a lot of foo-foo stuff. Because I think, a lot of that—I read a book before I started the church ministry. It’s called \textit{Why Men Hate Going to Church}\textsuperscript{21} and honestly I can’t remember the author’s name right now but it talked about how people

\begin{itemize}
\item United Rodeo Association. See more information here: \url{http://www.unitedrodeoassociation.com/}.
\item Real Cowboy Association. See more information here: \url{http://www.realcowboyassociation.com/}.
\item See more information here: \url{http://www.kshsc.org/}.
\item See more information here: \url{http://www.neksaganythinghorses.com/}.
\item See more information here: \url{http://ksbra.webs.com/}.
\item See more information here: \url{http://www.mkyra.org/}.
\item See more information here: \url{http://www.christianyouthrodeoassociation.com/}.
\item \textit{Why Men Hate Going to Church} (2011) by David Murrow.
\end{itemize}
have a thermostat. They’re comfortable—some people are comfortable with the warm weather and some people are comfortable with the cold weather. The church as a whole through the years began to set that thermostat towards women. Nurseries and carpets and nice padded pews and chairs, and again, all of those are fine. I have nothing against it. I grew up in that—it’s great. But there are a vast number of people out there—construction workers and truck drivers and cowboys—have muddy boots and dirty jeans and sometimes even bad habits, heaven forbid, that aren’t going to those churches. What are we doin’ to reach ‘em? We started the Cowboy Church. Just come on along. Through belonging, hopefully you’ll see that there’s a difference in our lives, because of Jesus Christ, and that you might believe in him too, and then you can become whatever he wants you to become. So, I think that’s the end of my spiel. [laughter]  

**HC:** Alright, awesome! Well, thanks so much!  

[00:46:54]  
[End of Recording]