

Interview with Pastor Carl Garrett, Rutlader Outpost Cowboy Church

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

Interviewee: Carl Garrett (**CG**), Pastor of Rutlader Outpost Cowboy Church

Location: Rutlader Outpost Cowboy Church, 33565 Metcalf Rd, Louisburg, Kansas 66053

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Length: 00:15:57

Transcriber: Haley Claxton

Abstract: Oral history interview with Carl Garrett conducted by Haley Claxton at Rutlader Outpost Cowboy Church in Louisburg, Kansas, on June 15, 2015. This interview features Carl Garrett, the Senior Pastor of Rutlader Outpost Cowboy Church. Pastor Garrett discusses how he came to Rutlader Outpost Cowboy Church, his definition of Cowboy Church in general, and his vision for the future of the 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: Hello, my name is Haley Claxton and I am here with Pastor Carl Garrett from the Outpost Cowboy Church—

CG: Rutlader Outpost Cowboy Church.

HC: The Rutlader Outpost Cowboy Church—Pastor Garrett, how did you start off at Cowboy Church?

CG: Well, I'd heard about the Cowboy Churches. I'd seen it on television. I grew up in cattle country. My parents and grandparents were all cattle people, and my father was a cattleman and farmer until I was about eight when he left it to go into the pastorate. My first pastorate was in the big, ranching country in Western Oklahoma, so that's my background. I—ya know, I grew up on a horseback, so it wasn't strange to me—the cowboy way of life. I grew up around it. Then, I watched the Cowboy movement taking

place, then in oh-five,¹ I went to do an interim pastorate at First Baptist Church in Carthage, Missouri, where I had served a number of years ago. And while I was there, they started a Cowboy Church out north of Carthage.² I was curious about it, and visited a time or two, and really, it just kinda took me back to my roots, because I grew up in cowboy boots and jeans, ya know, and the idea of getting to do church in cowboy boots and jeans, after being in Johnson County,³ for sixteen years, in three button suits, ya know, and the whole thing, it's—it's kinda fun. I went, and when I finished the work up there, I came back here and I live about 15 miles south of Rutlader here—come up 69⁴—and we'd come to the Opry a lot up here, and had the auditorium and every time I'd come by I'd think, "That'd be a good place to start a Cowboy Church." And—the more I thought about it, the more I couldn't get away from the idea, that—might oughta pursue it. So, I stopped and Mrs. Harris—Brenda Harris—and Bill Harris owned this facility and—so—and I knew them from coming to the Opry, just by name and they knew who I was, and I knew them, but I didn't have a personal relationship with 'em, but I stopped, talked to Brenda—Bill wadn't here—and she said, well, she'd talk to Bill about it. And so a couple of weeks went by, hadn't heard anything, thought I probably wouldn't ever hear anything, then Bill called me, asked me to stop by and talk with 'em. I sat down, and talk with 'em down at the office and about thirty minutes, Bill said, "Let's do it." And so, that was in oh-seven⁵- or oh-eight.⁶ Oh-eight wadn't it?⁷ Oh-eight. And September of oh-eight, and so, we started in the Opry house up here, uh—September 21st of oh-eight, and they decided to close the Opry for the winter—we'd had two really bad winters—and that was too big a facility to heat for the small group we started with. So they have a, they have a room down here they use for hospitality for the big trailer park, so we moved in there, and pretty quickly outgrew it. This used to be an upscale furniture store down here and it had just gone out of business. There were three sections of it. We leased this⁸ and moved down here some time in oh-nine⁹ and been here ever since. That's how it started.

[00:03:43]

HC: So, what denomination of church were you brought up in?

CG: I was raised Southern Baptist. My father was a Southern Baptist pastor. I was a Southern Baptist pastor. I had actually started pastoring a little country church in the cowboy area, big cattle ranches—in Western Oklahoma—when I was a senior in high

¹ 2005.

² Risen Ranch Cowboy Church in Carthage, Missouri; more information can be found at their website: <http://www.risenranchcowboychurch.com/>.

³ Johnson County, Kansas.

⁴ 69 Highway in Kansas.

⁵ 2007.

⁶ 2008.

⁷ Addressing Tresa Mote, present for interview and bandleader at Rutland Outpost Cowboy Church.

⁸ Gesturing to the room in which interview was conducted.

⁹ 2009.

school. Been in it ever since. Not a day since March of 1957 I haven't been a pastor or staff member or something related to the ministry.

HC: What would you say makes Cowboy Church what it is?

CG: That's a question I get asked, Haley, all the time, and I think—really the best answer for me, is it's just a return to simple church. There's a lot of us grew up in country churches. You're the age of the super church. That's come in your lifetime, or a few years before you were born, but, that's come in the last thirty years. The big, big, big super churches. And I pastored a huge church there in Overland Park,¹⁰ a large church with over two thousand members, but my background was a small country church with thirty people to a hundred or hundred and fifty people, and there's a lot of people—that's their background. And then... today's church has just started to get more sophisticated and sophisticated and a little bit more removed from the common people sittin' in the pew, so I think the Cowboy Church appeals to the country roots of a lot of us, but surprisingly, we've got a lot of people who attend who were raised in Johnson County¹¹ or Kansas City, ya know, and so I think the simple—simple life, and simply going back—well you were here in attendance for a service. You saw how “formal” we weren't [laughter], but ya know, I think that appeals to them.

HC: One of the things I'd noticed—you'd mentioned that it was sort of a simple, return to roots kind of church. One of the things that I noticed was that you guys didn't have any sort of hymnals—

CG: No.

HC: —or any sort of bulletins—

CG: No... I grew up with hymnals. I didn't grow up with bulletins... Oh ya know, the later part of my high school years, the church probably might have had bulletins, I don't know—but I didn't really grow up with 'em. But of course we didn't have the technology—back in those days—of havin' everything on the screen. All of our songs were on the screen.¹² And frankly we do a lot of stuff and it isn't in hymnals. She—our band leader—writes, and several of us in the band have written stuff. We do a lot of

¹⁰ Overland Park, Kansas.

¹¹ Johnson County, Kansas.

¹² Motioning to video projection screen beside stage in worship space, where interview was conducted.

original stuff and current stuff that is... various styles of contemporary music to country gospel. And they're really not published in any hymnals and they are also arranged by our band leader for us as a band to do, in various keys rather than what's in the book. We vary—it wouldn't always sound like to the write—it's very innovative. So we just don't have a need of it 'cuz we have the screens and a lot of big churches anymore—very few of them have a hymnal.

HC: So, tell me about how you would describe worship. Do you have baptisms ever?

CG: Yes. You won't see a baptistery in this building, but you'll see one out behind the building. [laughter] We have a stock tank—like you water horses or cattle in—and we do baptism by immersion, and so we bring the rubber tank in, set it right back over there in that corner, fill it up with water as high as we can, and I baptize.

HC: Do you ever have communion?

CG: Yes, we have communion, probably at least four times a year. We do it, right here in the room. We are doing it a little different—no different in taking the elements¹³ and no different than a lot of other churches that aren't Cowboy Churches. They now have—you can buy 'em at Mardel's or Lifeway Christian Bookstore—they now have a little cup container where the wafer is on the top, and they can just take the cup and pull off the wafer and you don't have to pass the cup. Nobody has to handle it—a lot of people like that better because they are not taking it out of something that's passed in front of you and a lot of other people. So that's a modern thing and that's the way we do it. Now we have, at times, invited other pastors to come in to help from all kinds of churches. I'm not a Catholic, but I'm not anti-anything. And when people ask me, "What denomination are you? What denomination is the Cowboy Church, or your church?" I just reply to them, "Whatever you want it to be." I don't make any bones about the fact that I am Southern Baptist. People who come here know that. I don't say anything about it, but they'll soon find out if they ask me personally, like you did. I'll tell 'em I'm Southern Baptist. But we don't talk about denominations. I didn't do much of that when I was pastoring. I just preached the Bible and let it appeal to those that it appealed to. That's our philosophy here.

¹³ Traditional name for the bread and wine used for Christian communion practices.

[00:10:40]

HC: So, do you think that Cowboy Church has a future? Or why do you think Cowboy Church has been growing so quickly?

CG: I think there's several answers to that. And I don't know if any of us have the definitive answer. One of the reasons, and I've talked to numerous Cowboy Church pastors, and you will in your interviews—I'm gon' be interested to find out and look forward to reading what you find out—but, without exception, to this point in talking to the other Cowboy Church pastors: all of us are reaching a number of people who have dropped out of traditional church. We gotta—they've gone to church regularly in the past for some time, but for various reasons, they've dropped out. Some of them have been hurt in church disputes, lost a favorite pastor, just all kinds of reasons—but for various reasons, they've dropped out of going to church. You're going to find each Cowboy Church is gonna be a bit different—well, maybe some of them are not. There is an organization and some of them may follow particular models—but most of 'em have been started by an individual pastor, so they follow—kinda follow—I just modeled this the way I wanted to do it. And when Tresa Mote, our band director, came on not too long after we got started—and she and I were friends and she's a pastor's daughter—unfortunately for her, we think a lot alike and so we have just created our own organization, not modeled after anybody. And we've kept it totally informal. No organization, no business meetings. You noticed we didn't say anything about the offering. We never do unless we have a special guest and are taking a love offering for them. We simply have a blue bucket on each table. Until recently the word “offering” wasn't on the bucket. Someone in the congregation took it upon themselves put a sticker with the word “offering” on each bucket. We have never had any financial problems. People seem to have a sense of it being a safe place to come—informal, no pressure put on 'em, no business sessions to sit through, no decisions being made—just a fun, fun place to go. And frankly, our potluck dinner at the end hasn't hurt us any [laughter]. I don't know whether other churches are doin' that. I know some of them are. But—we didn't start that. We started, when we first started, my wife and I. We'd go by Sam's¹⁴ and pick up some cookies, and she'd make some coffee and tea, and it's be—we'd have a little fellowship time afterwards. Pretty soon the ladies started bringing desserts. And then before you know it, they'd started bringing salads, and then it's casseroles and fried chicken, and I'm looking forward to when it includes steak! But never once have we said anything about bringin' food. That just happened. And so, what you see here is just kind of a product of what people just made it themselves. We didn't design any of this. It just happened. And I'm not sure I could duplicate this—honestly, I would love to try. I have a real desire—I know some churches that are just hangin' on, with fifteen, twenty, or thirty people, ya know—and I would like to try the same model we got right here. I'd like to take the pews out, put the tables in, and—have Tresa come do the music for me, and the band, and try to see if we could revive

¹⁴ Grocery store.

some of these dead churches in some of these small towns. And—actually our director of missions in Kansas City Kansas Baptist Association, we’ve talked about—we believe we could make one of these go in Johnson County.¹⁵ And if I were not as old as I am, I’d try it. On a different night.

HC: Alright, thank you Pastor Garret. I think that’s all the questions I have for right now. This is Haley Claxton from Rutlader Outpost Cowboy Church. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

CG: No, I just appreciate this and I am really interested in what you come up with.

[00:15:57]

[End of Recording]

¹⁵ Johnson County, Kansas.