

Interview with Pastor Chris Bray, Prairie Trail Cowboy Church

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

Interviewee: Chris Bray (**CB**), Senior Pastor of Prairie Trail Cowboy Church

Location: Prairie Trail Cowboy Church, Haysville, Kansas

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Transcriber: Haley Claxton

Abstract: Oral history interview with Chris Bray conducted by Haley Claxton at Prairie Trail Cowboy Church in Haysville, KS on June 28, 2015. This interview features Pastor Chris Bray, Senior Pastor of Prairie Trail Cowboy Church. Pastor Bray discusses how he got involved in the Cowboy Church ministry, the ideology behind his ministry, and about how to grow a church successfully. 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, my name is Haley and I'm here with Pastor—

CB: Chris Bray.

HC: —at Prairie Trail Cowboy Church in Haysville, Kansas.

CB: Yes ma'am.

HC: Now, before we start talking about your ministry, can I ask you a little about yourself?

CB: Sure!

HC: Did you grow up in the church?

CB: I grew up in the Catholic Church—as a boy. Irish Catholic in central Indiana, so in the church yeah, sorta. Catholicism’s a little bit different, but yeah.

HC: What brought you from Indiana to Kansas?

CB: I was in the Air Force, so I traveled around the world and kind of made a loop back and ended up in Kansas. Was here, stationed here—and then, when I got out, I moved to Texas and that’s where I lived for a long time, and then the Cowboy Church brought me back.

HC: Alright, so how did you get involved in the Cowboy Church?

CB: I actually went to Friends University¹ for Christian Theology and a Theology Master’s degree in Christian Studies and—I got wounded at a church here, local, and we all know that churches are imperfect but you don’t understand that sometimes until it happens, and, so I kind of fell away from the church and went into the restaurant business and I was very successful—in Texas—and was just going through some kinda really, ya know, rough patches and owned a ranch and they had just opened a Cowboy Church in Wichita Falls² and it kind of caught my eye because of a mishap with a horse. They tried to ride the horse into a portion of the church, and they just had built a new building and they had practiced it several times, but without people and without water in the tank,³ and as the lights kind of speckled off the water, the horse kind of bolted over and just about took him off, and I said, “I gotta check this place out if this guy’s crazy enough to do that.” So, we went to church. And like I said, I hadn’t, ya know, hadn’t

¹ Friends University in Wichita, Kansas.

² Wichita Falls, Texas.

³ Water tank (used for baptisms).

used any of my information or college. I hadn't, I mean, done anything and—just started goin' to church because it fit who I was.

HC: So how did you get from there to this church?

CB: So, being skeptical of any church at that point—I sat in the back—and you'll find at most Cowboy Churches, most—that's what happens. People will come in right before church starts, leave a little before it's over. They've either been wounded or never been or don't, ya know—they've been to enough funerals or something that just give them the off taste for traditional church. And I'm not bashing traditional church, but it's just, we serve kind of a niche market. And, so I just went there, and just sat around, and was asked to serve, which I thought was crazy because I didn't really do anything. But I was asked to serve, approached to serve. Got on the chuck wagon team, started a youth program, ended up being a lay pastor, and then, one day the pastor looked at me and said, "I don't know your background, I don't know what you're runnin' from, but you need to be in ministry." And—because he'd forced me to preach a couple times. That church had grown to about twelve or thirteen hundred people. And so, he goes, "This is what you need to be doing. I feel this is what God's call is for ya." And most pastors... they feel it. They just don't wanna do it. It's a—hard job. People don't realize the pressure, and I knew and I knew, I just didn't want to. And I knew I needed to do it. So, there again, God works in his own way. They make me—I'm with the American Federation of Cowboy Churches⁴ and they had a coaching position open in Haysville,⁵ and my wife's parents were living there and they weren't doing so well, so we were driving here. And so I said, "I'll be there at least once a month. I'll pick that church up." And got here; it was kind of a train wreck. Started with sixty people. When I got there, it was down to ten to sixteen. Was coaching through it, the pastor quit. So, through that, the pastor quit and they asked to fall under the church in Texas, as we were the closest Cowboy Church to here that was affiliated with the American Federation of Cowboy Churches. And so, Jim said, "Under one condition: I want Chris to be your interim for a year." And I'm sitting right there, and I'm like, "You could ask." He's like, "I just think you should do it." So, I started to travel there and back—long story short, I traveled for about seven or eight months. And we went from eighteen to about a hundred and fifteen. Moved from Mattox Arena to back over to here.⁶ They'd started here. And they called me to be the pastor. Neither me or my wife wanted to come back to Haysville,⁷ but God was callin' us back

⁴ See more information here: <http://americanfcc.org/>

⁵ Haysville, Kansas.

⁶ Mattox Arena is located in Derby, Kansas.

⁷ Haysville, Kansas.

here so we accepted the position. That was 2010 I guess, late 2010—no, probably later than that. Right around that time frame. And that's kind of what brought us back, and we kind of at that point started to plant the church.

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HC: How would you describe Cowboy Church to someone who has never heard of it?

CB: It's Cowboy Church with no restrictions and no—it's *church* with no restrictions and no boundaries, other than what the Bible calls for. So, man imposes a lot of rules and, I'm okay with that. Again, I gotta preface it because I don't want people thinking that I don't like traditional church. Traditional church is great—but they impose rules. A certain way to dress, no hat, and, ya know, don't drink coffee here and—there are rules. And it's okay that they have rules. Rules tend to be walls that people can't get past sometimes because of their sin. So it's one thing if I'm a church member and there's no water in the sanctuary because it feels disrespectful, you can't wear a hat, but when I start to impose those rules to where I drive people away, then I have an issue, so, Cowboy Church is a church for the unchurched or the dechurched. You come in with a cup of coffee, nobody's gonna care. You come in with a spit cup? Who cares? You come in wearin' your hat, who cares? You bring your dog, who cares? We don't care. We just don't care. And—I had a lady on her e-cigarette in the first service, you know? And I'm—at first it bothers me a little, but then ya know, I'm like, "She's not hurtin' anybody." So who cares? I could tell by lookin' that she's wounded, so why add insult to injury, ya know? That's somethin' we could talk to her about a month down the road. Right now let's just keep her in here. So we have no boundaries or barriers to keep you from coming in and hearing about the lost, or about Jesus, and to hear about why you as the lost need to be saved. So we get rid of the stained glass, the big fluffy podiums, the flowers, the big carpet, ya know? We just get rid of it all to where you just come in and feel comfortable. You spill something, who cares? If your dog shits—ya know, we don't care. It gives the people of our culture and of the rural community and rednecks and Nascar fans and whatever you wanna call 'em, someplace to go to feel comfortable enough to hear about it.

HC: And so you aren't really connected to any kind of denomination then?

CB: The Cowboy Church—the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches started off as a Southern Baptist—Western Heritage Ministry is what they called it. The American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches is a non-denominational. They have spun off and are now their own 501c3 religious organization, so they are not—you are probably always going to get a bit of a Baptist flavor, but there's some things that we don't agree with in their doctrine and, ya know—I don't believe the Baptism is a call for salvation. I believe we have types of baptism: baptism of the Spirit and baptism in water. One is through the Spirit, and one is an outward appearance of your inward faith. So, that's where we might differ a little bit. So, I think you'd feel a little Baptist flavor in it.

HC: How—I noticed the music was different from any of the churches I've ever been to aside from Cowboy Churches. How does that kind of play into the concept of Cowboy Church?

CB: We like to put it that we want to hear something like you'd hear Saturday night. So—and that's probably pretty calm. Tame today. We play about anything, and we'll throw a couple of old, ya know, Country gospel-y hymns in it. Other than that, it's mostly what you'd hear on the radio. Not the nasty, raunchy stuff, but stuff you can relate to in your life. So, it plays a huge, key part in giving people a way to even invite people to church because lost people are afraid to tell you about their salvation, but they'll tell you about their band. So, it also gives us an outreach opportunity as well.

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HC: Who attends your services? Who would you say you reach out to the most? Or what do you seek to reach out to?

CB: We reach lower middle-class America. Blue collar—ya know, I call 'em Nascar fans and rednecks. Our people are gonna be more in tune with *Talladega Nights* than the Reformation Act.⁸ They're just regular, very simple people.

⁸ *Talladega Nights* (2006) is a comedy film starring actor Will Ferrell.

HC: And how do you get the Word across to them? There is a lot in the Bible that's really complicated to wrap your mind around. How do you take it from the Bible to what they know about?

CB: I think that's the hardest part, especially for a traditional pastor to come from and make the switch. Is—one: they want to hear it real. They don't want it fluffed, they don't want a bow on it. They want it as raw and as real as you can give it to them. Two, you need to be able to apply it in their lives, so you need to be able to give them an example so—sometimes my sermons can go a little long because by the time I give them the background to it and why it is there and why He is saying it and the context, because they've never read the Bible, they're never gonna read the Bible, they need to understand there's different contexts to this in different areas of the Bible. And then I give them an example—and it could be a little rough around the edge, but they understand it. I kind of equate it to the old Puritans. Their services were *two hours*, ya know, but there was so much life application in it that people just stayed because they got something out of it. So the Puritans didn't deviate on either side. You got your Bible study, you got your life application, and you could understand it and that's why it ran so long. Ya know, now we either have prosperity preachers that are over here just being fluffy or we just have guys over here who are beating you over the head with it. You gotta be in between somewhere. So, sometimes it runs a little longer, but it works.

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HC: So how do you think the Cowboy Church is growing so fast? One of the things I'd noticed in doing my research is that—all of them seemed to have started in the last five to ten years and it's been growing so quickly. What would you attribute that to?

CB: Because it's real church for real people.⁹ I mean—ya know I've been out to traditional church. When I was in school I was serving in one of the churches in the city and they were geared toward a certain people and it fit it—and traditional church just does not fit *real* America, you know? The real Heartland, blue collar of America. Their preachers are over-educated—not that education is a bad thing, because I'm one so I can't—but they're over-educated, they speak over 'em, they don't dummy it down

⁹ This seems to be a Prairie Trail Cowboy Church motto, as this phrase was used several times throughout the service and in answers to the survey I conducted about Cowboy Churches.

because they want to almost keep you in that sense. They preach way too much about money even though, yeah, Jesus talks twenty percent of his teachings about money, but they preach about it too much. They live too fancy a lifestyle that they can't relate to. Ya know, there's just all these barriers that are out there. And so we left a certain area of America unchurched. We have the rural churches, but we don't have the—kind of suburbia church that's—ya know you've got inner city and the metro, then you've got suburban, then you've kind of got this fringe before you get out in to the country. There's a fringe out there of people we've just left behind. That's who we target and that's why it's growing because they're hungry. They've always wanted a church, they've always wanted a place where they can stay connected and plugged in. I mean, I could have an all-call for a church work day tomorrow because they don't have a lot of money, but they will give their time and their talent and that's never been enough because we've built our churches so massively that their overhead is outrageous. I mean our—we built this whole complex for under \$300,000. We got this building and our land for free. We built that building, we built the arena, and we fixed everything else up and gutted everything and we've got a little more than \$300,000 in it. For most churches, that's not even a down payment. For a church for three hundred people, that's not even a down payment. We're a church of five hundred people and we're comfortable and our debt is minimal, so we don't have to dig ourselves in such a hole where we have to beg for cash. We need to take in about \$1,800 to \$2,000 a week to meet our needs. That's nothin', ya know? I mean, for us it's a lot, but for a traditional church, that's horrible. So, we fit that niche of people that just are hungry and real and need a real church to get behind.

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HC: How do you reach out to youth too? I know a lot of churches have a lot of trouble with modern youth who are all connected to technology.

CB: I think we all do. I don't think anybody has that figured out. But again, our youth don't have the stuff that—I mean, most of them don't have a new iPhone or iPad, I mean—we're not those people. We're eatin' kind of people. Most of my people to put food on the table and have basic TV is a big deal, and to keep the air on. So, we don't have as technology advanced kids. I mean, they have a phone, they know how to use it. They know how to use a computer, but they still like to fish and play, and so we just do that. Now, everything has to be driven off of—you can't tell them a story, you got to show them a video. So you have to know that side of technology to know where they're at. Even our kids—every one of our kids' rooms has a TV and DVD because they have

to interact that way—or, ya know, they went fishing on Friday and they had a hoot—no phones, no nothing. Just down by the old Arkansas River. But, we struggle with it just like everybody else. I mean, just because we're different doesn't mean we don't have things that they struggle with.

HC: I think I have one last question. What do you see as the future of your ministry here?

CB: Well, we've grown so rapidly—we grew from—we had eighteen people at my first service as an interim pastor, at max, and we were at Mattox Arena, to a good Sunday morning is about 450 or 500—and we've noticed that you take Easter service and that's about where you'll move to, and we decided about between 650 and 700, so that's where we think we'll land sometime in the late winter. That's where we'll probably land for this year's growth and so, we're just trying to keep up, ya know? We're just trying to keep one step ahead, ya know? We went from one service to two, and there are days we could get away with one and we could seat 3[00], 325, so there's days we could pull it off, and there are days when we are just packed. We made that transition. Before people came in and just weren't comfortable. There's just not enough space to sit. Overcrowding. Because you know the 80/20 thing still works. You want to have twenty percent of the seating open so—even more so here. So, we're just trying to keep ahead of the game, financially, spiritually, to carry us and we're ready for what comes down the road and not get us in so deep. So that's where our leadership is to just stay ahead of the curve of the growth. I complain about that a little bit and people are like, "That's a little thing to complain about." But still, it's an issue nonetheless. The arena is going to take us to a whole new level because we just built it. We spent four years at the massive growth without ever having an event at the arena, and we are targeting the working cowboy. Here's—think of it this way: Aim small, miss small. So if we aim for the working cowboy, we're gonna get the rodeo queens and the barrel racers and the can chasers, and the ropers and, ya know, all those people. And then the fun show people are gonna hit this next outer ring, and then the John Wayne fans, and the country—we're gonna hit this target. As long as we're pointing here, we're gonna hit this target. So, that's why we build these things, because this is a safe place for them to come, we can do it cheap, it's not about making money, it's about a ministry, so we can do great events with minimal money outlaid from the guys who are comin' in. So that's gonna take us to a whole new level and we've just been struggling because of all the rain. We put it in last fall until it got just bitterly cold and nasty and then we started up again and then we've had all this rain and we're unable to get it finished, so we're really looking forward to this fall getting that open, and I think that'll take us to the next level. We don't

advertise, we don't do anything, we—our church has grown because of the people inside of it. And here's what—my last two cents worth for any church: You have to grow the four walls before you grow anything. When I was in the restaurant business, I had a term. I said "If your four walls aren't tight, don't look outside." 'kay? So if you're taking care of your four walls, which is your people, and you're givin' 'em, feedin' 'em, having discipleship programs, giving them fellowship, giving them—your church will naturally grow from your people. I put it as "I'm the wholesaler, and you're the retailer." My job is to feed you something more so I can go out and feed the rest of the world. So, we've grown up to this point without havin' —we have one community outreach event a year. Everything else is geared in-house, but invite your friends. So, like our family picnic? There's no advertisement anywhere. There's no billboard, there's no flyers, there's no anything. It's "Hey, listen. Bring your family and your friends and let's do that." So that's how we've grown the church. I believe that the four walls will naturally grow it. As long as you're taking care of those people; and we've had people come and go. We've lost some and gained some, but you're going to continue the growth pattern by doing that. And I don't care what kind of church—I don't care if you're a Motorcycle Church. I don't care if you're a church on the corner. I don't care. It works and most Cowboy Churches don't get it. That the arena's cool, but it's just a tool. That's our feeding the homeless. Think about it that way. Those guys that do that, they're going to never really be in church that often because that's their passion, their life. That's where they're gonna be so let's give them some church in that life, but if we have 800 people here for an event, if we get eight of them to just show up to church on Sunday is a big deal. One percent. Just on that Sunday, I don't know how many you're gonna keep, but just to get them to come back, for church, once—so that's never gonna grow your church. That's gonna reach 'em and plant a seed so that God can use it when he needs it, so a lot of Cowboy Churches put way too much stock in that and not in growing their church, so they don't have a lot of discipleship programs. They don't have any of those kind of things. And you'll see a lot of people leave them after they start to mature because they can't keep growing. So, our ministry is to grow our people and if we grow our people, our people will grow our church. So that's kind of where we're at.

HC: Alright, well that's all the questions that I have unless there's anything else you want to add.

CB: No, but I really appreciate you coming out and spending your time.

HC: Thank you so much for your support as well.

[00:22:17]

[End of Recording]