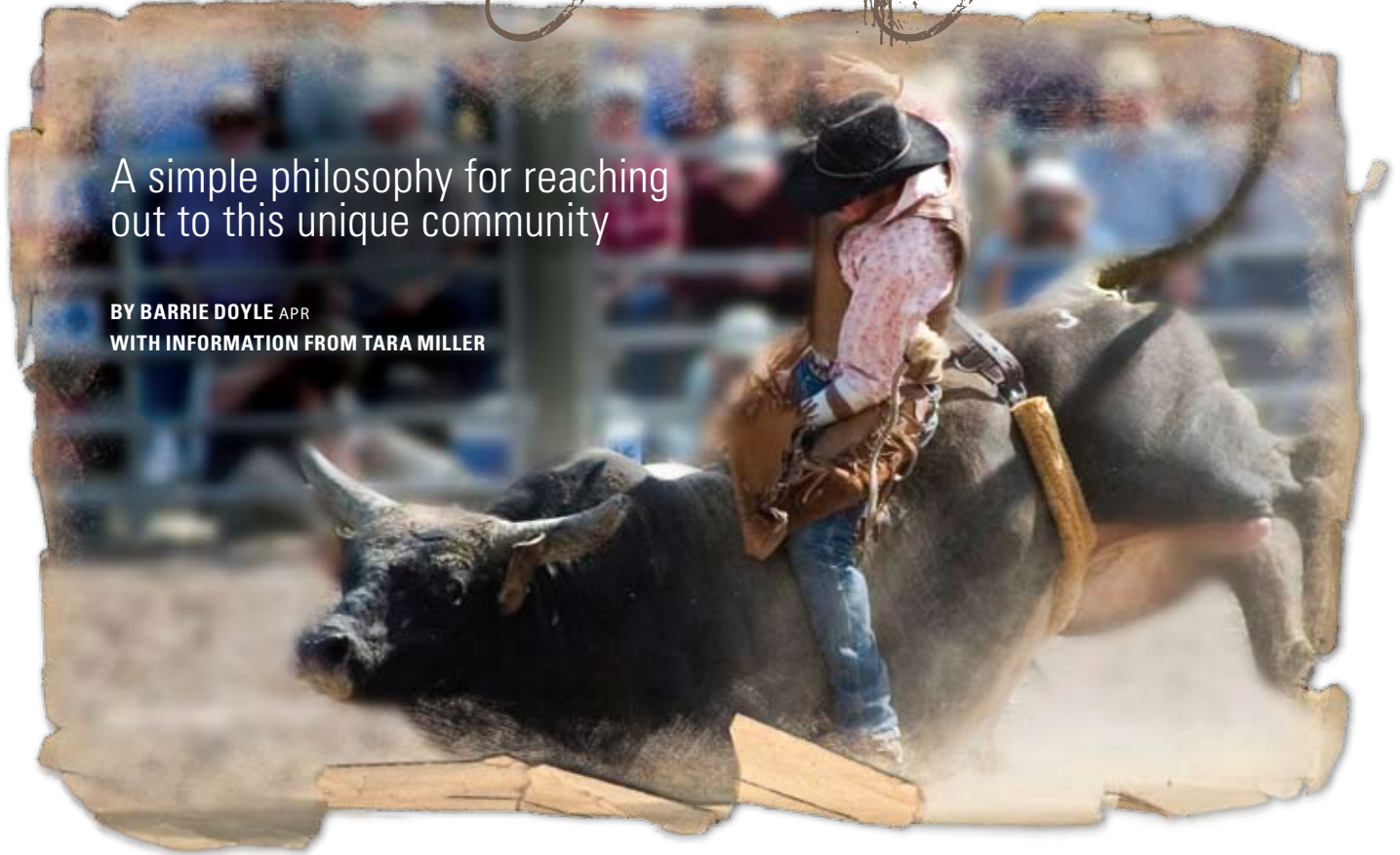


# Riding On Faith the Cowboy Way

A simple philosophy for reaching out to this unique community

BY BARRIE DOYLE APR

WITH INFORMATION FROM TARA MILLER



It started with a simple prayer. Faced with a growing dissatisfaction with his ministry, Blair Bates and his wife Brenda told God that whatever he wanted of them, they would do; wherever he wanted to send them, they would go. Bates admits that they wanted to stay in the Okanagan Valley where they'd put down roots, but they were serious about their prayer. God, in turn, began leading them down an unusual path of ministry.

Seven years later, the Cowboy Valley Church is reaching out to the unique cowboy community prevalent in southern British Columbia. The venture began in a small way, following that prayer. With a daughter eager to take riding lessons, they began building relationships, first with the owner-operator of a riding school.

As with his first prayer of obedience, another simple

prayer played a part once again. As the riding-school's owner coped with a major family health crisis, Bates offered to pray. "She knew I was a pastor, so she said yes and we prayed," he recalls.

When God healed her husband, Bates soon found that he was being asked to pray for rodeo participants' safety in a year when injuries abounded. "That was a door that God was opening," he said. Within a short time he found himself asked to pray before rodeos beyond Peachland. From those humble beginnings, the overall ministry began to develop.

Within four short years, he was holding mid-arena services at least once a month for rodeo participants. Soon he was asked to do the same for high school rodeos throughout the region.

"It's all about building relationships within this

## Cowboys have a very deep love and reverence for God's creation

community," he notes. "All of them (the cowboy community) are God's children. They don't go to church, they may drink and carry on and they may take the Lord's name in vain, and yet 'church' is a very real part of their culture.

"Cowboys have a very deep love and reverence for God's creation. They acknowledge God as creator and they also understand that he is sovereign over his creation. There is an unspoken respect for God—unspoken, but it's there."

Throughout southern British Columbia there is, he says, a huge cowboy community. "In our area alone there are more than 1,000 ranches." Major gatherings for this community often focus around rodeos, with 300-400 events annually.

While Bates's focus is on the cowboy community, he notes that the same principles apply for any pastor or individual seeking to impact their own communities. First and foremost is that initial prayer of obedience to God's will. Then it is waiting for God to show you individuals and ways you can serve.

"Maybe your 'culture' is a business culture at the local Chamber of Commerce or Lion's Club, but your approach must be the same. Learn the culture, live your life before them and understand that God loves them."

Bates's background as a musician and worship leader also showed rodeo conveners that he was comfortable 'on stage' with the result that, over the years, he has increasingly been called into action as the rodeo announcer. That too, he sees as a God thing. His visibility as the announcer leads to interest in his pre-rodeo prayer times which, in turn, leads to a deeper interest in the overall ministry.

Cowboy Valley Church now holds biweekly services. Attendance varies. "Sometimes there are just a few. Other times we get more." Part of that is the fluid nature of the cowboy lifestyle—a sense of individualism and



Photo by Cassandra Carr

independence rather than spending time as a group. He also notes that some of the individuals he's counseled and spoken with over the years may not be attending his services but are, in fact, frequenting other churches across the valley and around southern B.C.

"God gives us a little bit more each year," he says, noting that this Christmas he held a Christmas Eve service in the barns at the riding school. "It was about as close to that first Christmas as you could probably get—worshiping Christ, surrounded by the sounds and smells of the animals." More than two dozen people showed up for that simple, but moving service and they are people who intrinsically are seeking more.

As he lives his life, Bates knows he is under a microscope. "We know that people are watching us. They want to see whether we live out God's truth in front of them." In his own humanness, he remains vulnerable before his community.

"They've seen my mistakes, heard my apologies and they accept me." That genuineness and flawed humanity strikes a chord with the cowboy community who celebrate honesty above most values. "They don't expect me to be perfect in front of them. I am 100 percent where I am supposed to be!"

The key, he says, is simple. "God is opening doors."



Blair Bates

Photo by Tara Miller

## They simply seek to respond obediently to God when he asks them to step into situations

Despite the heavy costs for travel to move from one rodeo venue to the next, he is seeing God touching lives through the cowboy ministry. In 2009, Bates held services at the Vernon, B.C. championships and his 2010 schedule is rapidly filling up.

The concepts of planning and strategic thinking play no part in the development of Cowboy Valley Church. He merely prays for the community and waits for God to open doors. He and his family reach out in practical ways as well. "We try to help and give service. We're on the ranch fixing fences, hauling cattle or even rescuing horses during summer fires."

He and his wife are not trying to force their way into other's lives, he says. They simply seek to respond obediently to God when he asks them to step into situations. "God gives us the opportunity and he gives us the words to speak." That has led to the various roles he fills far beyond that of the normal pastoral function.

"I want people to know God's love the way we know it. I am here because of someone's obedience to God. Someone loved God so much they reached me and now I want to return the favour. If I don't do it, who will?"

For many churches, congregation counts and growth are crucial. But for Cowboy Valley Church they are irrelevant. "God doesn't worry about numbers the way we often do. He simply loves and calls one heart at a time!"

That simple philosophy and strategy is one he wishes others trying to reach different groups and individuals would follow, even when the frustrations and disappointments build. "Sure we get discouraged," he admits, often crying out, questioning God, "What are we doing here?" Sometimes, he ruefully notes, "we're singing a worship song ... and I am the only one singing. But that doesn't matter, because we're still praising God!"

This kind of ministry is, he agrees, "not for the faint-hearted." It requires him to work full-time to cover his family's needs as well as ministry costs. During the rodeo season, the schedule itself is brutal enough without the pressures of work and the constant needs to minister to and counsel individuals. "If you don't have the drive and the passion for this kind of ministry, don't do it."

In a word, he says, the key is obedience. Obedience to God's call and a willingness to do whatever it takes to follow through on that call.

"You have to love your community," says Bates, no matter what that 'community' is. "You have to love them and who they are and embrace where they're at. It took me many years to really understand this and I am grateful that God has been so patient with me as I learned." Quite simply, "I have to see people through Jesus' eyes rather

than my own."

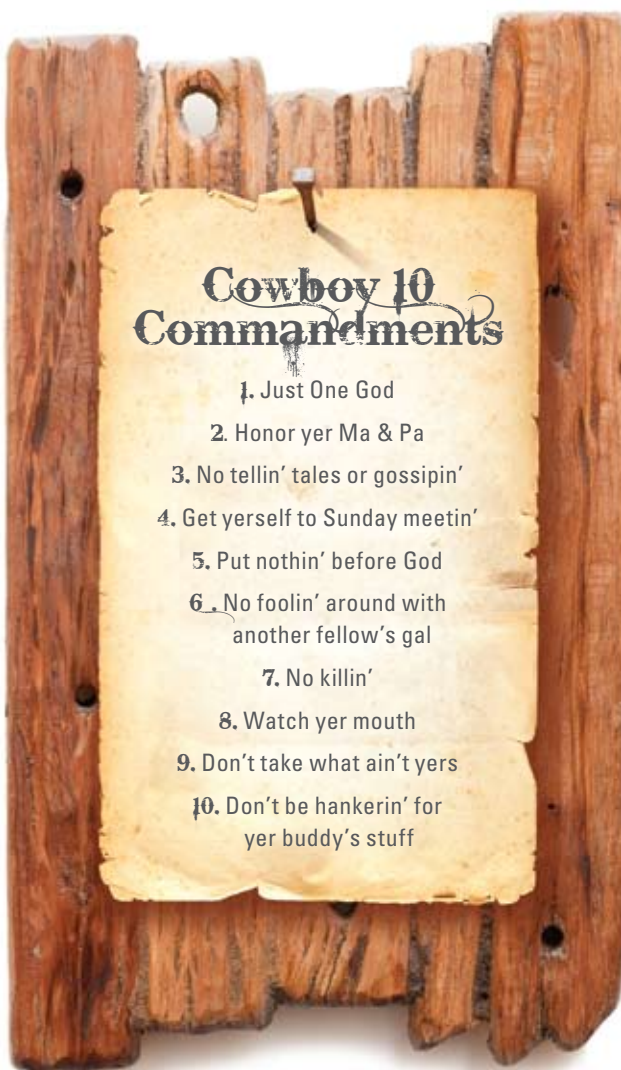
He wonders if, in our churches, we have lost that. "Have we so isolated ourselves that we don't see people through God's eyes, but rather our own?" he asks. "Wherever God has planted you, you need to let his love grow."

All of that is mitigated in his case, he confesses, by one other simple fact. He loves the cowboy lifestyle and community. "God has given us something we're passionate about and we are able to work in it for his purposes. I feel like I am seeing things and doing things that are far beyond what I could do on my own."

Cowboy Valley Church may be a unique ministry reaching a uniquely Canadian culture, but its dynamics and story can be repeated by many other exceptional ministries across Canada, all reaching out to unreached people in cities, towns and villages sea to sea. ☪

For more information visit [www.cowboyvalleychurch.com](http://www.cowboyvalleychurch.com)

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### Cowboy 10 Commandments

1. Just One God
2. Honor yer Ma & Pa
3. No tellin' tales or gossipin'
4. Get yerself to Sunday meetin'
5. Put nothin' before God
6. No foolin' around with another fellow's gal
7. No killin'
8. Watch yer mouth
9. Don't take what ain't yers
10. Don't be hankerin' for yer buddy's stuff