

that he and his wife Ann were told they couldn't have children. After months of treatments and procedures, she finally conceived. Nate believed God's promise was being revealed. "But right after we told our families that we were finally having a baby, I was in the doctor's office with Ann." His head drops, his voice quivers. The child was gone. "But God had a purpose and plan, I just didn't understand it," Nate says.

Nate and Ann decided to adopt. Now their 7-year-old son from the Ukraine sits to Nate's right, on the front row. He has assimilated just fine. Naturally, he is wearing a cowboy hat. His belt buckle is as wide as his waist. When he sings the songs his daddy plays on the guitar during worship, his Southern accent is as thick as the Tennessee humidity.

His name is Canaan. For the land that was *promised*.

After him came three more boys—Isaac, Eli, Noah—all biological. "Every time I look at them, I see God's promise," Nate says. "It was all in the waiting."

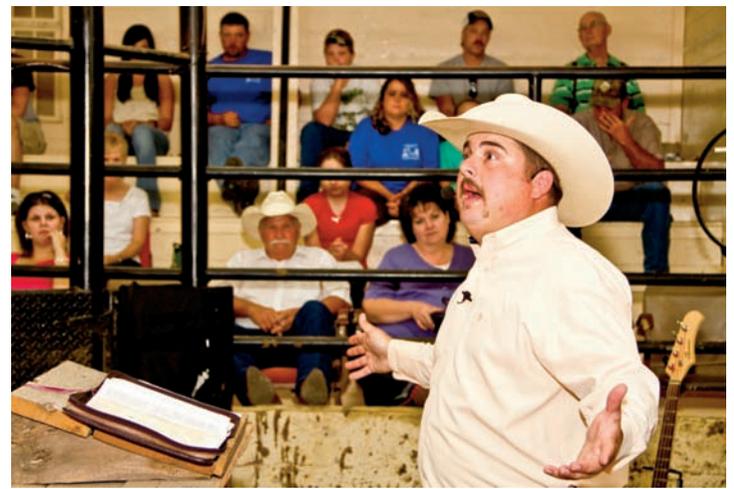
THE STOCKYARDS ARE ON the north side of Lawrenceburg. On the way here, Thousand Hills congregants will pass as many as a dozen churches. "This is Tennessee," says one member. "Anywhere two roads cross, you can count on two things. A gas station on one corner, and a church on the other." People who attend here have many choices for worship. So what's the draw?

"Other churches, when they try to reach people, it's 'Ready, fire, aim,'" says Nate. Not with Thousand Hills. Almost everyone is a farmer, rancher, horse owner or trail rider. So pretty much everything about cowboy church fits these folks like a broken-in boot. Like John and Marcia, everybody fits in.

That's not an accident, and it's no stretch to call the cowboy church a laboratory of sorts for marketing the Gospel. This isn't old-time religion, in spite of the patina. It's calculated, canny and—judging by its cracking success—just the beginning. Cowboy missionary Jeff Smith has a vision of fashioning church services for other target markets like golfers, paintballers, even NASCAR fans. Pastor Nate compares it to the Apostle Paul's Scriptural vow to become all things to all people. "That's it. That's the idea," says Nate. "We have to be clever about it, but the underlying message never changes."

IT'S TIME FOR BAPTISM. The trailer with the horse trough is parked in the gravel lot of a church member's just-opened restaurant. The shaded front porch fills up, and the congregants—sated from a potluck dinner—overflow into the ferocious noontime heat to watch. Among those taking the plunge are a husband and wife, and a mom and daughter. After the baptism, the young couple stands over the trough, dripping, holding hands, overcome. Mom hugs daughter in a towel. A half hour later, still wet from their baptism, they invite another church family to an afternoon trail ride. "When it cools off a little," Mom says.

As the day winds down, Pastor Nate makes an announcement. It seems Thousand Hills Cowboy Church won't be meeting at the sale barn much longer. Nate points to the north. "Right up there, right out on Bre ad, the church has made an offer on 22 acres of land," he says. It's somehc ppropriate that the a few week pu in



Top: Pastor Nate brings the Word. Horse-trough baptism is a cowboy church highlight.

