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Baptist Artist's Talent Allows Opportunity to Share His Faith

By Debbie Stewart

RICHMOND (BP)--If every picture is worth a thousand words, Bob Harper has written volumes on Christianity in the universal language of art.

Harper, art editor of *The Commission*, journal of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, has had his provoking black and white paintings displayed in 20 countries to persons of diverse racial, economic and spiritual backgrounds.

The paintings and their titles depict emotions, ranging from Fear to Resolution and states of mind, from Isolation to Included. The Christian painter, interpreting these moods, tells of the God who loves man in all these conditions.

Harper, a North Carolina native, coordinates visual aspects of *The Commission*, complementing written material in relating the work of Southern Baptist missions in 77 countries. Since assuming his position in 1964, he has also traveled abroad as a photo-journalist for the Baptist journal.

While music and the spoken and written word have developed as means of Christian testimony, Christian artists have not fully utilized visual arts in this manner, Harper believes.

"A creative artist has the responsibility of developing not only a creative product, but also creative means of sharing his product," Harper said.

"It's mighty comforting to stay in your studio and paint, but I like the adventure of life, the arts...and the adventure in Christianity."

Baptist missionaries have displayed Harper's art as an opportunity for Christian witness for several years. With Baptist foreign missions financing shipping, the paintings were displayed in galleries, parks, student centers and hospitals.

Missionaries have shown them in Vietnam, Austria, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dahomey, Ghana, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Liberia, Malaysia, Mexico, Senegal, Singapore and Uganda.

In 1969, Harper realized his dream of traveling abroad with his art when he went to Southeast Asia on an assignment for *The Commission*.

Although Vietnam was not on his agenda, he prepared a group of paintings entitled *Explosion 13* and found the opportunity to display the art in the war-torn country. Harper mounted his show on sandbags in the field. Soldiers gathered out of curiosity and lingered because of interest.

The next opportunity for Harper to stage a one-man art show abroad came in May 1973, when five Baptist missions in the Caribbean area (Antigua, Trinidad, Venezuela, Dominican Republic and Guyana) cooperated to bring the artist and his *Symphony of Moods* series to their countries for a free art show open to the public.

"A Christian artist with an interest in their spiritual and cultural welfare" made an impression on the Caribbean people, Harper said. Local officials and leaders appreciated the cultural benefits of the Baptist art shows, and the people seemed eager to discuss the paintings.

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"This is the kind of thing you want to talk about," a Guyanese artist commented, pointing to a painting entitled Intolerance. "When I see it, I want to talk to someone, to tell him how I experience that emotion."

Remarks about Harper's art by visitors who signed the register during his first show in the Caribbean area at Antigua included "terrific impact," "provocative, absorbing, revealing." One admirer said, "Man, have you got soul, feeling and expression."

Missionaries followed up on the purpose of the art shows by visiting persons who gave home addresses on the register.

Feeling a personal responsibility as a Christian artist beyond the satisfaction of just painting, Harper encourages people to develop their expressiveness through visual arts, noting that "Christ enhances, not limits, the creative abilities dormant in man."

Harper hopes to coordinate an international Christian art show, including an art piece by a student in each of the 77 countries where Southern Baptists have mission work.

Seeking novel ways of displaying art, Harper has staged shows on beaches, a train and in prisons.

He's also pursuing possibilities of showing paintings on long flights of commercial airlines and to servicemen overseas.

Nine Harper paintings hang in the permanent art gallery of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Army Secretary Howard H. Callaway has a Harper painting in his office.

Harper likes to make the most of opportunities to communicate Christianity through art. In August he displayed paintings at the national congress for teenage Royal Ambassadors in St. Louis.

A St. Louis Cardinals baseball game that week featured the RAs, members of a Southern Baptist missions organization for boys, in pre-game activities. During the activities Harper presented the team a painting entitled The Spectators.

Whatever the setting, it seems Bob Harper finds a way to put impact on canvas.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Miss Stewart served as a 1973 summer intern in the Foreign Mission Board press office.

BP PHOTO mailed to state Baptist paper editors.

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Mercer University Plans New
Medical School; Names Dean

8/24/73

MACON, Ga. (BP)--Mercer University here has announced plans for a new medical school, expected to begin in 1976, initially in an expanded version of the school's Willet Science Center.

The 140-year-old Southern Baptist school has named Dr. Nat Smith, associate dean and professor of medicine at the University of Illinois College of Medicine, as dean of the proposed medical school, effective Oct. 1.

Initial funds for the new school will come from a \$2 million campaign planned by the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce to expand the Willet Science Center, a \$1.9 million grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to purchase 48 acres surrounding the campus and \$5 million appropriated by the Georgia Legislature.

The proposed school will be designed to train "primary care" and "first contact" physicians and to emphasize the clinical specialty of family practice, with an innovative approach to team health care training.

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The school will set up a series of "health access stations" to provide health care in a 27-county area of middle Georgia and give students early exposure to the practice of medicine.

The access stations will operate in areas needing health care and will use a team approach. Medically indigent patients will be accepted, as will paying patients who lack other sources of medical care.

Each station will have a permanent staff of a manager and/or a registered nurse. Team members at each station will consist of at least one faculty member, residents and medical students, a nursing instructor and nursing students, physician assistant students and pharmacy students from Mercer's Southern School of Pharmacy.

The first entering class will have 24 students. Each subsequent class will expand 12 more students until a class size of 96 is reached.

The school especially will recruit students from rural areas who have expressed interest in primary care medicine, as well as students with a broad college background in liberal arts and social sciences.

Faculty will be divided between full-time and part-time members, including physicians in surrounding communities. Mercer hopes to establish a faculty-student ratio of 1:2, close to the national average.

Dr. Smith, a native of South Carolina, is a graduate of Erskine College, Due West, S.C., and the Medical College of Georgia, Augusta. He joined the University of Illinois College of Medicine in 1957.