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Texan's musical moves from patriotism to faith

By George Henson

Staff Writer

CARROLLTON—Mike Harland hopes the patriotic musical he took the lead in creating helps its hearers remember God and country—and in that order.

Harland, associate pastor for worship at First Baptist Church in Carrollton, was the creative force behind LifeWay Christian Resources' newest patriotic musical “America, We Must Not Forget.”

The project originated prior to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that have forged a renewed sense of patriotism across America.

Mike Harland

Harland, who has been a part of two previous LifeWay projects and a third for another publisher, was approached about creating a patriotic musical in the summer of 2001.

“Then Sept. 11 happened, and we realized this was going to be a bigger thing than we at first thought,” Harland said.

Despite the immediate connection, LifeWay decided not to accelerate the

schedule already in place.

"I'm now glad it worked out that way, because it allowed me to have a deeper, broader perspective, rather than just reacting to one event," Harland said.

Actual work on the project began with a brainstorming session with Chris Machen of Plano, who collaborated on the project.

"One of the things I noticed in our country's response to the attack on Sept. 11 was 'We must not forget.' Everywhere you looked after Sept. 11, there were posters, bumper stickers, T-shirts, just everything that said 'We must not forget.' Chris and I were talking about how there were other things we must not forget other than the attacks."

As he and Machen tried to pin down the things that should be remembered, Harland's wife, Teresa, who had been sitting across the room overhearing, said: "We must not forget our heritage, our heroes and our hope."

"She took all she had heard us talking about and said it in one sentence," Harland recalled.

Those three areas now form the outline of the musical.

Every song but one and all the narration were written specifically for this project, Harland said. He and singer/songwriter Luke Garrett wrote "Sea of Glory" prior to the musical.

Harland's vocations as songwriter and minister of music meld into one in this project.

"I don't compartmentalize my life," he said. "I'm never not a songwriter, but I'm never not a minister of music either. I hope the day never comes when I have to make a choice between the two. I would not ever want to not be a minister of music, and I know that God has given me a talent as a

writer that needs to be used for his glory.”

First Baptist Church in Carrollton is not asking him to make that kind of choice, and neither is LifeWay.

“It takes a lot of understanding on both entities' part,” Harland admitted. “LifeWay knows I'm a minister of music. I rarely if ever have felt any pressure put on me like they might a full-time writer living in Nashville.”

“First Baptist Church has a real impact-the-world mindset, and I think they see this as an extension of this church's ministry—as a way to touch the world,” he said.

The church has supported this project in several ways. The choir presented the musical in San Antonio and San Diego at music conferences and also will perform this summer at Glorieta, N.M. In another show of support, Harland's pastor, Brent Taylor, accompanied him to Nashville for the taping of the project.

Harland is careful to guard against short-changing his church, however.

“I don't write songs every day. I'm more of a project writer, and on projects you know when your due date is. I budget that time. My work here at the church is the pressure I feel every day, and I work on the project as time comes.”

His music ministry enhances his writing ministry, Harland said.

“I love getting to interact on a day-in, day-out basis with people through the music ministry here,” he said. “People who just create choral product don't get to see how it affects people, but I do. I love seeing how it affects lives.”

A number of churches around the state and country are deploying “America, We Must Not Forget” into their music programs. At least seven churches in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex alone plan to perform the

music around July 4.

If people outside the church are drawn to listen because of the patriotic flavor of the production, that's fine with Harland, because he knows they also will get a large dose of evangelism.

"This music probably goes farther from a spiritual standpoint than any patriotic music I've seen," he said. "We certainly wave the flag strongly, especially in the opening pieces, but it is strong enough scripturally to lead someone to Christ. From the outset, we wanted to do more than wave the flag; we wanted to bring people to the altar.

"We want to honor America, but we want to worship God," Harland said.

That emphasis was precisely what encouraged Jonathan Aragon, minister of music at First Baptist Church in Duncanville, to join his choir with that of Hampton Road Baptist Church in DeSoto for two presentations of the music.

"This musical appealed to me because it is as religious as it is patriotic," he said. "It calls America to not only remember its patriotic heritage, but its religious heritage as well."□The choirs will perform at the DeSoto church June 29 and the Duncanville church July 6.

A devotional reading of Isaiah 41:20 was pivotal in writing the music, Harland said. In that passage, Isaiah reminds the Israelites that they were not blessed because of their inherent goodness or greatness.

That's a message for America, Harland said.

"God blessed America, not to show the world how great America is, but to show how great he is."

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.