

Temple church opens Great Commission Gallery as ministry_120604

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Twenty-plus
missions
photos by
Don
Rutledge
from
around the
world are
featured in
the first
exhibit at
the Great
Commission
Gallery at
First
Baptist
Church in
Temple.
(Bill
Bangham
Photo)

Temple church opens Great Commission Gallery as ministry

By Bill Bangham

SBC International Mission Board

TEMPLE (BP)—Warm walls, wood floor and generous lighting set the stage for simply framed photographs spaced precisely about the room. People, plates of finger food in hand, circle the exhibit while a string ensemble and keyboard play beneath the murmur of quiet conversation.

It could be a Saturday night gallery opening in the art district of many American cities. But this isn't New York or San Francisco or even Dallas.

It's Temple. And the gallery isn't in an art district, but in downtown Temple's First Baptist Church.

Still, it is an opening in the truest sense, with all the scramble of a new enterprise featuring the work of an internationally known artist.



"The Griffin Estate Edition of Black Like Me"-the first hardcover version of the 20th century classic published since 1977-appeared earlier this year, 45 years after the author's six-week experimental journey through the Deep South disguised as a black man. This cover photo, by Don Rutledge, was one of several images published for the first time in relationship to the project he undertook at age 29.(Wings Press Photo)

Called the Great Commission Gallery, this is a new ministry for First Baptist, and it's the first exhibit related to the church's Fellowship of Christian Artists. The current exhibit focuses on the photography of Don Rutledge, whose work documented Southern Baptist mission efforts across the globe for more than 25 years. Rutledge shot photos in more than 140 countries during the course of his long career.

The idea for the gallery began last year while First Baptist member Linda

Schuchmann was reading Rick Warren's book, "The Purpose-Driven Life." Schuchmann is a painter but had become deeply involved in other ministries around the church, and it had been years since she applied paint to canvas.

"That book helped me to realize the gift of art God had given me had to be used," Schuchmann said. So she began painting again.

It was at the beginning of this year, just after the Christmas season, and she began working with an idea for expressing joy. She chose her colors—"beautiful colors," she said—and in abstract expression, began spreading them on canvas, swirling and mixing them. When she finished, there in the midst of an expression of joy she suddenly saw the flames of Pentecost. It tied feelings for the birth of Christ with the beginning of the spread of his gospel throughout the world.

"I had not intended to paint flames of fire," she said. "They were just there. I thought: I've got to share this with someone."

A discussion with Doug Young, First Baptist's minister of education and administration, led to setting up a small display of the painting along with several other pieces of Schuchmann's art in his office. When she returned to collect them, Schuchmann got unequivocal affirmation from member after member of the staff. "Go for it," they said. "Find a way to share this work."

What began as a desire to share her work quickly evolved. Schuchmann began seeking a way to help other Christian artists share theirs. In March, the first meeting of Fellowship of Christian Artists was held at the church. There are now 25 to 30 artists involved. They meet monthly and include graphic designers, photographers, a ceramist and painters who work in oils, pastels and watercolors. They chose as their mission statement: "Drawing all people to Christ."

They usually meet in homes. At each meeting, an artist gives his or her testimony and makes a presentation of their work. Students from the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor and Temple College attend. “We have little children attend too,” Schuchmann added. “We're encouraging them in their development as artists.”

Early on, the fellowship began talking about holding an exhibit, and they quickly settled on Don Rutledge's photography.

“We had to have Don,” said local photographer Nan Dickson. “The work is beautiful; it's missions-related. It was a no-brainer.”

“In a sense, we had to have an exhibit before we had a gallery,” Schuchmann said. “The gallery wasn't a gallery, it was just a room.”



"Street Meal"— One of the photographs by Don Rutledge in the gallery at First Baptist Church in Temple.

That room—the future gallery space—was created when renovations opened a new passage connecting the sanctuary with one of the educational buildings. The room appeared to be of little functional value. It was dark.

The carpet was stained and dingy. The walls needed painting. With an open entrance at each end, it was essentially a large, open hallway.

When it was offered to the fellowship for exhibit space, "We were content to use it as is," Dickson said. But the church offered to paint it and replace the carpet. "We were thrilled," she said.

"The closer the exhibit came, the more church members became involved," she continued. When the old carpet was removed, the wood flooring was discovered. The church agreed to refinish it, install a new ceiling and add track lighting. Signage was donated. The result is a first-class gallery space.

On the same weekend First Baptist kicked off its Lottie Moon Christmas Offering effort for international missions, the gallery also opened.

The exhibit drew people from the community, students from the local university and college, photographers and friends of Rutledge, and missionaries he photographed both overseas and in the United States during his 15 years with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board and his 10 years with the Home Mission Board.

He and his wife, Lucy, were scheduled to attend, but could not at the last minute for health reasons.

But Rutledge's son, Mark, and daughter-in-law, Peggy, IMB missionaries to Haiti, and granddaughters Shannon and Abigail were there.

Pastor Martin Knox dedicated the 16-foot by 25-foot space and entry corridor to "give the glory to God" for the talents of Christian artists that would be shared with the greater community through the visual arts ministry.

The crowd wandered among the 20-plus prints, including images from

Rutledge's missions coverage across the globe—South America, Asia, Africa, Europe, inner-city America, rural Alabama and Alaska—as well as several prints produced for John Howard Griffin's 1950s groundbreaking and controversial book on civil rights, “Black Like Me.”

A native of Murfreesboro, Tenn., Rutledge received a bachelor of arts degree from Tennessee Temple College and bachelor of divinity degree from Tennessee Temple Seminary, and graduated from the New York Institute of Photography.

Through assignments with Black Star, a leading New York City photo agency, Rutledge's work has appeared in hundreds of general-interest periodicals, specialized magazines and international publications.

Schuchmann said Rutledge is working on his memoirs of adventures in his missions service, with accounts of hazardous travel to remote destinations and his encounters with engaging people from around the globe.

“His pastoral sensitivity and keen eye,” she said, created images that capture Amazon tribesmen, heads of state, Native Americans, immigrants, missionaries “and people of many faiths from all walks of life, in places of luxury and in lands being destroyed by famine and wars.”

With additional reporting by Terri Jo Ryan of the Waco Tribune-Herald

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