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ERIK ALSGAARD/UMCONNECTION

Artist Earl Ridgell creates a soul-stirring picture during an open house at the Conference Center March 18.

Conference Center opens spiritual displays

BY ERIK ALSGAARD
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Earl Ridgell has been doing performance painting for the past year. He starts with a four-foot by five-foot canvas and, with music playing in the background, in about 12 minutes, paints an image you won't soon forget.

And he won't tell you what the picture is at the start.

"That's part of how the ministry works," he said. "It's a surprise, because it looks like certain things as it progresses."

Ridgell, a high school teacher, is also the senior-high director for West River camp following a 20-year career in art design. He created one of his paintings for staff and visitors at the Baltimore-Washington Conference Center March 18, during an open house that showcased the building's spiritual side.

More than 60 people have offices at the Conference Center, where worship and holy conferencing is held in seven different meeting spaces.

In an effort to reflect the church's ministry, a variety of stations for reflection and meditation have been created throughout the building. March 18 was the first opportunity to see the results.

Along the long interior hallway of the Center is "The Way of the Cross," 12 displays of crosses and meditations where visitors are invited to consider the role the cross plays in their own faith journey, according to the Rev. Vivian McCarthy, chairwoman of the Spiritual Center Committee for the conference. This is supported by a station in the Resource Center area offering meditations on hymns of the cross.

"We imagine these meditations to be used by people as they prayerfully walk through the hallway," said McCarthy. "We

want people to imagine themselves at the foot of the cross and how they might feel, and how those feelings might affect their daily living."

At the Conference Center, visitors will notice a new, more colorful lobby. As people step through the door, they will be greeted on one side with words of welcome, reflecting some of the cultures found in the conference.

On the other side of the lobby, words for "Shalom," or "peace," in different languages, may be found as people exit the building.

In the large conference room area, a 30-foot wide banner hangs which interprets the conference's 2003 theme of "Repair the Breach, Restore God's Community." Created by Patricia

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Displays: Center offers gallery space for spiritual nourishment

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Hutchins Jackson, it served as the backdrop for that session of annual conference. The tapestry holds symbols of communion, children, unity and resurrection.

Even the back door area of the Conference Center has been spruced up. It may seem odd that between the communications and Council on Ministries areas hangs a collage, but the committee, McCarthy said, felt that since this is the way many staff members enter the building, it was a place where a reminder of the church's mission would be deeply felt.

Created by UMCConnection associate editor Melissa Lauber, the four panels are titled "Heartsong: a Collective Hymn." The images reflect the themes, "I Am," "Go," "Do," and "Be."

The images and reflection areas will change over time, said McCarthy.

"We're looking at the Conference Center as a place for artists, sculptors and painters to showcase their work," said McCarthy. "The idea is to create a place for those whose art is an expression of their spiritual journey." People may contact her for information on how to have items displayed at (800) 492-2525, Ext. 434.

For painter Ridgell, his ministry has taken him places he never thought he'd go.

"I was looking for how God could unite my passion for theology and my passion for arts," he said. Inspired by an act he saw on the old Merv Griffin Show years ago, Ridgell began doing some sketches and took classes at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

"For my final project, I submitted my sketches and my paint studies," he



CAROL PITTARD HAMMER/UMCONNECTION

The four panels of "Heartsong: a Collective Hymn" hang in the back hallway of the Conference Center.

said, "and I unveiled it last summer."

Since then, he's done his performance painting more than 15 times.

"Usually there's a lot of chatter" when he paints, he said. "People react in many different ways to the images. In the last church I did this in, people were actually weeping at the end."

At the Conference Center, there was awed silence when Ridgell finished. Several visitors mentioned that the painting affected them deeply, especially coming just before the start of Holy Week.

And that's just fine with Ridgell. But no applause when he's finished, please.

"I kind of like to have people not applaud, just because I think the Holy Spirit will work on the audience even more," he said. "And that's kind of neat."



MAKE THE CONNECTION

For Earl Ridgell, performance painting is a "faith ministry." He does not charge to come to a church or event and paint. "It does cost money," he said, "but I let God take care of that."

Ridgell is available for churches or other groups. Call (410) 687-0159, or e-mail eridgell@yahoo.com for more information.