Evangelist spreads word with art

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HENDERSON — Some use music, others words; evangelists have many methods to impart their message.

The Rev. Jerry Long's method is invisible to the naked eye.

Long, a "chalk art evangelist," lives in Henderson but travels across the country to share his ministry, "Bible Truth in Lights."

He creates a scene with chalk, but there's more to the picture than meets the eye. When Long darkens the room and illuminates his creation with black lights, a second picture appears.

During the year, Long uses small pictures to illustrate his sermons. First he prepares the canvas for the painting, then completes the picture while music plays.

At Easter and Christmas, Long creates murals. This Christmas, he's created a mural at Henderson Bible Church, where his son-in-law, the Rev. Bart Leger, is pastor.

Long says he always liked to draw, and when he first came to Louisiana in 1977 he used that talent to reach his congregations.

"I didn't speak French, so I decided to use my drawing to spread the Lord's word," Long explains. "When I first started, sometimes it took me a long time. Sometimes half the congregation would leave before I finished. But, the more I would do it, the better I got, and I liked doing it."

The mural at Henderson, which will be featured at Christmas programs on Saturday and Sunday, is at first glance a serene, snowy scene. The focal point is a lake, with a church and a house on its banks. Trees and snow cover the other portions of the mural.

But when the room goes dark and the black lights go on, a second scene emerges from a seemingly pristine snow bank. On the left, lights shine from the city of Bethlehem, and the fields surrounding the city are colored with a soft light from the Christmas star.

On the right, a cross stands on a glowing red hill, surrounded by mountains and a tomb with the stone rolled away.

In the center, a host of angels surround an image of Jesus as he descends from heaven and presents himself to the world as a child.

The images revealed by the black light are so vibrant that it's hard to believe you can't see anything by daylight. On closer inspection, it is possible to see imprints in the paper from the invisible chalk, but it still is hard to see the hidden picture, even when you know what you're looking for.

The invisible chalk that Long uses is made by chalk art evangelist Ding Tueling. The piles of chalk that dot Long's work area look like regular white chalk until the black lights are on, then the colors explode and glow.

Long works in the dark, with black lighting, to create the hidden pictures. The invisible chalk works just like regular chalk, he says.

Long started using chalk art to illustrate his sermons after a trip to a teen camp in Georgia about 16 years ago.

"The Rev. Ed Williams was there, and he would do chalk art every night," Long says. "That was when the Lord spoke to me, and I just got the desire to try it."

His mother-in-law had an art studio, and thus, plenty of pastels. He started working with those, then got in touch with Tueling. He's been to several of Tueling's seminars and learned some secrets and techniques to use in his ministry.

Now Long spends about half the year on the road, taking his easel and chalk from city to city. Although they all represent a lot of work, Long never keeps his paintings.

"I don't have any in my house," he says. "I give them all away."

One man took a chalk painting home and hung it on his ceiling over his bed. But, because he didn't have a black light in his room, the main scene was all that was visible — until one night when a thunderstorm blew through.

The man went downstairs to get his wife a glass of milk, and while he was gone, thunder crashed, lightning flashed, and his wife came running down the stairs, screaming.

Evidently lightning works just as well or better than black light, and the woman was a little disconcerted to see Jesus appearing on her ceiling.

Most viewers react to the transformation with just as much surprise as that lady, Long says.

"First we put colored lights on the picture, and some of them think that's it. They're really surprised when the black lights come on," he says, laughing. "Sometimes, they yell and cheer, but that kind of kills the spirit. I try to tell them to control themselves."

But the pictures are just the trimmings for Long's ministry. Sometimes, because our society is so geared toward visual education and understanding, the message Long has to deliver is ignored, he says. The pictures bring that message to life and attracts attention, Long says.

The Henderson Bible Church mural will be the centerpiece of "The First Christmas Song," a program featuring music and a manger scene. The program will be presented on Saturday and Sunday, 6 p.m. each night, at the church on Talley Street in Henderson. For more information on the free program, call the church at (318) 228-2083.