

INK, QUILL, AND GOAL

HOW ONE MAN'S PASSION TURNED OVER 500 YEARS OF HISTORY TO CREATE THE ST JOHN'S BIBLE

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e all have a goal—one of mine is to run a marathon. So far, I can run a temperature.

Donald Jackson, the Queen of England's senior calligrapher, had a goal of writing the Bible by hand using traditional methods of 500 years ago. He had even found the inks for it in an old shop in England that was closing. They had a box of black Chinese ink, 144 sticks, 100 years old, pure soot, and perfect for the job. So he bought it along with some red ink sticks and stashed them away for that "one day" when a goal might become a reality. Donald Jackson would describe his dream as "The calligraphic artist's supreme challenge (our Sistine Chapel), a daunting task."

Beginning in 1984, Jackson had developed a relationship with the Benedictine monks of St John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN. Would handwriting the Bible be too large a project? The decision was, if one was going to do a big



project, then do it all—why run a 5km when a marathon is possible? In 1998, the millennial celebration project was launched to create the St John's Bible. Calligraphers and artists from around the world were commissioned to play vital parts of the innovative, yet traditional, project last achieved 500 years ago.

The layout is done on computer, so technology allows the calligraphers to work on different pages and illuminated images independently but holistically.

The Bible is written on oversized calfskins that are prepared by hand at the Scriptorium in Monmouth, Wales, during the driest time of the year. Both sides are written on, and become four pages of writing and



art. The quills are handmade from swan and goose feathers from the leading edge of the wing.

The splendid and vibrant illuminations in the St John's Bible are modern, meaningful,

and energetic interpretations of Biblical text meant to reach people in all walks of life in our 21st century. Images of the earth taken from Hubble, DNA strands, the Twin Towers, Holocaust skulls, digital voiceprints, and butterflies from Minnesota are representations of modern life, our relationship with science and nature, and how we now interpret art and literature with our imaginations. Social justice, the role of women, conversion, and hospitality are recurrent themes in the images. "Just as the Earth is not still, neither is scholarship, neither is depth of understanding," Jackson said.

Years ago, Donald Jackson bought 144 sticks of black ink. He will need 142 to complete the Bible. And the red ink sticks? Over time, Jackson had given many away. Now he would be short. On telling this story at a conference, a lady recipient of a stick said he could have it back. Enough red ink sticks have now drifted back to Monmouth to complete the writing. The project will end in May 2011, with the final penning of the Book of Revelation by Donald Jackson. Goal!

Twenty-five glorious printed illuminated panels will be on exhibit at the Hjemkomst Center October 9 through December 27. Lively public lectures are scheduled and group tours can be arranged. {awm}
