

# Bound & Lettered

ARTISTS' BOOKS & BOOKBINDING & PAPER CRAFT & CALLIGRAPHY



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# LETTERING ON THE WALLS OF A CHURCH

BY HOLLY MONROE PHOTOS BY TERESA CLEARY AND HOLLY MONROE



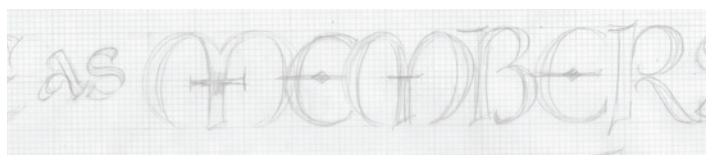
*My lettering on the soffit along the length of the church's Fellowship Commons room.*

When Northminster Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, called me in the Spring of 2012, my mission, should I choose to accept it, would be to letter nine phrases from the New Testament, Romans 12. They would enhance two fifty-foot lengths of soffits, eighteen feet off of the ground, in the Fellowship Commons. In the end, the text would include ten decorated and illuminated letters with the remaining words in a variety of colors, harmonious with the wall color. The goal was to present meaningful words to live by, beautiful enough to attract readers and in turn penetrate their hearts.

I had never lettered on walls, much less on movable scaffolding. I typically letter and illuminate at a drawing board. Yikes! What was I getting myself into? Literally rising to the challenge, I jumped in wholeheartedly.

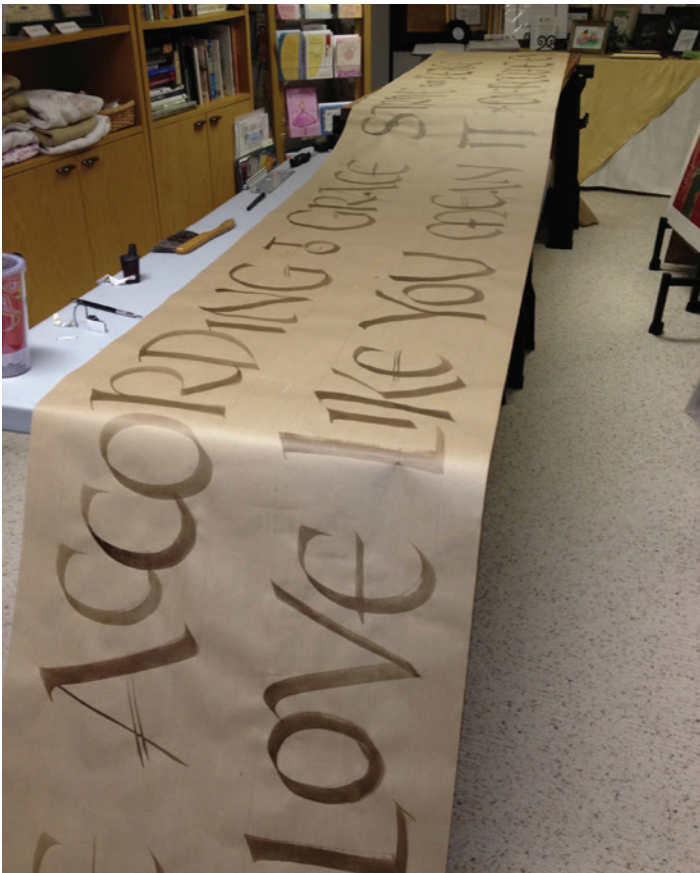
My first meeting was with an amazing art committee composed of church members, all with differing artistic bents. Our goal was to determine the lettering style. I packed up my samples plus my favorite *Letter Arts Review* and *Bound & Lettered* issues, and off I went to dazzle them with possibilities. After an hour and a half of perusing the pages, we settled on four styles to be sketched out on graph paper. From these, they would choose one.

Uncial was the winner! It worked well with the circular window in front of the room. Still, I was a little concerned. Would so many phrases in these wide letters fit the two soffits? The committee suggested compressing the Uncial. I was reluctant and began lettering 8" tall (uncompressed) Uncials with wal-



*Examples in four lettering styles (Versal, Blackletter, and two Uncials) were sketched out on graph paper and the church committee choose one.*

nut ink on a roll of brown paper at my studio. Initially, I was going to letter on a small scale and enlarge (which I recommend you consider), but I was pressed for time and was eager to see how the words would fit actual size. Actual size *was* a good call for this job.



*The phrases were written in compressed Uncial with walnut ink on a roll of brown paper at my studio.*

## Layout, Letters, Decoration

Before I could proceed further, it was necessary to determine how the phrases of varying lengths would best fit the two walls. Rich Schafermeyer, a committee member blessed with engineering skills plus artistic talent, was great with numbers and spaces. To facilitate this copy-fitting-on-a-grand-scale, he typed out the nine phrases and gave me four variations of the phrase order. I chose the order in which each wall would receive close to the same number of letters, putting the phrases slightly out of the Scriptural order. So be it.

Next, with the phrase order and letterforms approved, I wanted to refine the forms and the layout. The text had been lettered with a flat brush, but “off the cuff” and needed some enhancement. As the soffit was approximately 13.5" wide, I took a 12" wide roll of tracing paper and realigned the phrases and letterforms in pencil, until I was pleased.

The first letter of each phrase was to be decorated, so with a simple vine and leaf which would be underlaid with genuine gold leaf, I penciled them out. A decorative bullet between each phrase was requested, but that became a simple diamond, as the illuminated letter was quite enough.

Wondering if my layouts would work, I traveled to the church to unroll my corrected pencil roughs on the floor, beneath the soffit. Would the phrases fit on each side? Amazingly, they did. I had taken a chance and kept my round Uncial, but altered



*Using a pencil and a wide roll of tracing paper, I realigned the letters and phrases.*

the sizes of the letters a little for interest, buying a little space. It worked. The second wall's sketch needed a little adjustment, as it wasn't quite long enough. To adjust, I added a little space between several phrases by cutting the tracing paper once it was taped on the wall. The perfect filler for the extra space at the end of the soffit was “Romans 12,” the Scripture reference.



*Nine different colors were used for the letters and decoration.*

Our committee then met again. They approved my final pencil roughs, and committee members Gary Lord, Helen Haberstroh, and I selected nine colors from Sherwin-Williams color chips. The church walls were painted in a camel color, so we chose colors on three swatches that coordinated, picking both dark and light colors for variety and for shading and highlighting. Once I picked up the paint, I made three mock-up boards. On one, Gary and I tried a faux finish over all the letters to marry them together (Gary, who owns Prismatic Painting Studio, is a nationally known faux wall painting expert). In the end, we did not use it. The calligraphy stood on its own.



*Mock-up boards were made using both the wall paint and the paints for the letters. These show a faux finish which was not used.*

## Transferring and Painting the Letters

Now I was ready to transfer the outlined letters to the wall. Gary had his scaffolding available for me to work with, at exactly the right time. He set it up early Monday and said, “You should have this done in three days per wall. Just get it up there!” (Time would tell. I knew my work well enough to know that it might take longer; I pay attention to detail.) I ascended the scaffolding. It took me a few minutes to get used to the wobbling, but after setting up my “studio in the sky,” I was ready to go. It was like being on a high dive platform with wheels.



*The tracing paper template was taped to the soffit with Saral Transfer Paper underneath.*

The fun began! First, the tracing paper template, was centered on soffit one. Up and down I climbed until it was in place. I taped a roll of white Saral Transfer Paper beneath the tracing paper and with a ball point pen, traced the letters and decoration. After the tracing paper was removed, I began lettering with my Sherwin-Williams paint. Using a 1" wide brush, up and down I went again, as I painted all of the dark brown letters, then the gold, then the tan, and so forth. I struggled for awhile. The house paint was thick and didn't flow well. Thankfully, I had

purchased some extender which thinned the paint enough to give me a decent flow. The problem was that I had to give each letter two coats. Time-consuming! (I later learned about One Shot, a mixable, oil-base sign painter's enamel.)



*Interior house paint was used for the letters. It was thinned with extender to get a decent flow.*

My two weeks at the church were filled with serendipity! There were kind-hearted people who would offer to push my scaffolding when needed. Two days, the organist practiced and serenaded me. Various friends brought me lunch, coming for work-in-progress previews. I met two people who sing with the Cincinnati Opera, and each sang me an aria! What an awesome experience that was. The church pastors, Jeff Hosmer and Nancy Ross-Zimmerman, and church members were as welcoming as they could be. Committee member Rich Schafermeyer lived next door and brought his incredibly detailed scratchboard art over to show me. Daily he would check in, change my paint water, and talk art. The second Thursday, I worked until 9:00 p.m. and was therefore able to enjoy the Cincinnati Caledonian Pipes and Drums evening practice session at the church. What a rich personal experience it was working in a public place!

## Gilding, Decoration, and Shading

Once all of the letters were on the wall, the gold leaf was next. Gold size, from Jerry Tresser, was the base, laid with a brush to give a contemporary, updated look. I thought for sure



*Flat gilding with loose leaf gold added brilliance to the ten decorated letters.*

that I would use patent gold, as it is attached to tissue, which would make it more manageable to lay. (The air conditioning was blowing from directly under the soffit and aiming right at my upper body and the gold leaf in my hand.) Yet as I experimented, the loose leaf gold was more brilliant when applied, so loose leaf it was. To compensate, when ready to lay the leaf, I would make sure that the air conditioning was off.

The church is a beautiful New England-style white church building. Traditional, yet I was trying to give the lettering an updated look. The gold and the letter variance said contemporary, but the lettering style and vining brought it back to traditional. Flourished stems with shaded and highlighted leaves in a deep red and green helped each capital start a new phrase. There were *nine* phrases but *ten* decorated letters as I felt it important to decorate the *G* in God.



*A light cream shade was painted on the right and underside of strokes of most letters; gold letters received more shading.*

We had planned on shading the letters, but it wasn't until I stepped back that I could see how important the highlights were as well. The shade is a light cream-colored paint that I placed on the right and underside of each stroke. Every fourth

letter was in matte gold and was so close to the wall color that I needed to visually separate it from the wall with a left hand highlight. The highlight helped tremendously!

The first soffit was finished!

## Moving on to Soffit Two

Although I appreciated the exercise that the multiple-times-a-day-climb to the top of the scaffolding offered me, I needed to move quickly on the second wall. My strategy changed. Instead, I lettered, laid gold leaf, painted vines, and shaded/highlighted everything that I could from my 6-foot platform. When all was finished to perfection in that small area, I would move the scaffolding. I dropped four hours on the second soffit.



*My palette was an old church dinner plate.*

The final Saturday that I was at the church, I rolled the scaffolding around, retouching. Fittingly, the last flourish was placed on the word "Love." A scripture verse came to mind as I reflected on the project: Matthew 4:4, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." My palette for the project had been a church dinner plate. I had just served the word of God, from church plate to the wall, for man's spiritual nourishment.

Finally, after about 125 hours of planning, lettering, painting, and gilding (85 hours on the scaffolding), the project was finished. I was thankful to be done. 🙏