

Legendary Missionary Works on New Testament Translation

Viggo Olsen, who served 33 years overseas as a medical missionary for ABWE, is a legend in Bangladesh and in missionary circles around the world. *The New York Times* even compared him to **Dr. David Livingstone**, the great 19th-century medical missionary and African explorer.

But all of Olsen's accomplishments may fade in comparison to the work he is doing now. He and his wife, Joan, a distinguished missionary in her own right, are translating the New Testament into Muslim-friendly English.

At 85, their health doesn't always permit them to work the long hours that they once did. But, after several stops and starts, they have finished the first draft of the translation, are working on the second draft and plan to finish the project in 2013.

The need for special translations for Muslims became apparent after the Olsens began serving in Bangladesh, then known as East Pakistan, in 1962.

When they arrived, they found that the only Bible in the Bengali language available to Muslims dated to missionary William Carey's time in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Culturally, that Bible was better suited for Buddhists and Hindus. For example, it used a Hindu word, *Ishwar*, for God; *Ishwar* is one of thousands of Hindu gods. "To many Muslims, that is blasphemy and shocking," Olsen said.

The Olsens created a pocket dictionary of 4,600 Bengali Muslim words, then spent 10 years leading a team that created a **New Testament for Bengali Muslims**. Published in 1980, it became the No. 1 best-selling book in Bangladesh.

"We tried to get others to do it, but they had their own projects," Olsen said. "It seemed to us that this was the key to our work, so somehow it had to be done."

While he served as a surgeon at Memorial Christian Hospital in Malumghat, Bangladesh, which he and his medical team founded in 1966, he took time to work on the translation.

Sometimes we would work until 2 or 3 a.m.," Olsen said. "There's no reason that the translation should have turned out so well on the basis of our background, yet somehow it was God who knew the principle was right and gave us the help we needed."

Their translation team eventually produced a complete Muslim Bengali Bible, with the help of colleagues such as Dr. Lynn Silvernale, Dr. William Barrick and the Rev. George King. Since then, the Olsens have become renowned for their translations for Muslims, and Viggo Olsen has trained other translators to lead similar projects, with the concept of culturally sensitive translations becoming increasingly popular.

Biblica, formerly called International Bible Society, already has released the Olsens' Muslim-friendly English translation of the book of Matthew. The cover is green with gold lettering. Green has been associated with Islam since the days of the Muslim prophet Muhammad. The title is *The Holy Injil*—using the Arabic word for *good news*—with the subtitle "First Book: Matthew." The book uses certain Arabic words, such as *Isa* for Jesus and *Ibrahim* for Abraham, that have special significance for Muslims, no matter what their native tongue is.

"Small adjustments like that change the tone completely," Olsen said.

He has written three inspirational books, most notably *Daktar: Diplomat in Bangladesh*. Published in 1973, two years after

Bangladesh's war of independence, this No. 1 best-selling book concludes with the new government's decision to grant him Visa No. 001 in honor of his service.

Today, the Olsens live in Southern California. Despite being slowed by recent surgeries, their enthusiasm for their work has not diminished with age. They continue the production of the Muslim English New Testament, *The Holy Injil*.

"Millions of people all over the world speak and read English," Olsen said. "There are more than 3,000 Muslim people groups, with many English speakers in them, so this Muslim-friendly New Testament we're working on has the possibility of blessing every Muslim group in the world. That may sound like an impossible dream, but God makes the impossible possible."