

Local artist creates symbolic staff for Tutu's inauguration

By Kathy O'Reilly

When Bishop Desmond Tutu is inaugurated at St Mary's Cathedral on Sunday he will be presented with a staff.

A gift from his congregation, it will symbolise his new role as shepherd of his Christian flock.

Silver and goldsmith Tessa Fleischer was commissioned by the Dean of St Mary's, the Very Rev Merwyn Castle, to make the staff.

"Bishop Tutu was very specific about his staff — he wanted the traditional shape of the shepherd's crook, nothing contemporary.

"I had four weeks to

make it and I've never been so tired in my life!" laughs Mrs Fleischer.

Because the staff is about 1,5 m long, and thin, it was difficult to work with. "I had to forge, saw, file, turn, lathe, solder — but my husband Michael, a metal sculptor, was wonderful, providing lots of muscle and support," she says.

Mrs Fleischer wanted to use indigenous materials for the staff, and a friend gave her some tambouti wood.

Legend has it that the wood — which she describes as noble and strong — was used only by tribal chiefs for their

implements. Commoners found using tambouti suffered the death penalty.

The wood is also very aromatic and the artist found that at the end of a day's work, "I would feel quite sick from the smell. Some people are allergic to tambouti — I hope the Bishop isn't."

Mrs Fleischer also used silver and indigenous stones — amethysts, tourmalines and garnets.

For inspiration she referred to a book, "Church Vestments — Their Origin and Development" which described the history and functions of the staff.

To quote: "The staff is

partly descended from the walking stick carried by aged and decrepit bishops; the top is curved for the sheep which have wandered from the fold.

"The middle is straight, that he may rule the obstinate and disobedient, and the lower end is pointed — to spur on the slothful of his flock."

Is the artist happy with the final product?

"Sometimes — and sometimes not," says Mrs Fleischer. "I have really enjoyed making it, but have also felt a heavy responsibility because it is an important symbol for the Bishop."



TESSA FLEISCHER — with the staff she has designed and made for Bishop Desmond Tutu.

● Picture by Gideon Mendel