

Statement on Liturgical Dress

To wear or not to wear

There is a saying which runs - 'What we wear says something about what we are'. This becomes very meaningful when, in times of need at home, at an outdoor event, or at a hospital we look for and welcome the fireman, the St John's Ambulance Brigade member or the nurse - each clearly identified by what he or she wears. Even in the day of jeans and unisex wear, dress is still useful in helping us to determine the gender of the wearer when that is important. When it comes to ministerial attire it is argued sometimes that those who lead worship should wear only their customary clothing so as to identify with the whole congregation. There is an impossibility in this whatever the good intentions. It will be inevitable that the female worship leader in her attire will not be able to identify thereby with the males in the congregation - and vice versa. So there is a case to be made for attire which is not distinctive to either gender. The symbolism involved in this way is a declaration-of essential inclusiveness and not of differentiation by class or gender.

Within the life of the Uniting Church we are coming to understand and make informed use of a number of Christian symbols. In some of our churches we are accustomed to choir members and the organist putting on choir robes. Their individuality laid aside, they take up the role of 'team' dedicated to leading congregational praise. On the other hand, while 'motley' may be the only garb for Shakespeare's fool in "As You Like It" this certainly does not mean that a variety of attire among choir members casts them in the role of fools or renders them incapable of singing in tune or making 'a joyful noise to the Lord'. So the use of liturgical dress is encouraged within the Uniting Church, but remains an optional matter.

At the same time the wearing of liturgical dress points to seriousness of purpose and the conscious adoption of a role of special responsibility - when a choir dons its robes, or a minister puts on alb and scarf or stole before stepping into the church for the service on the Lord's Day, a wedding or a funeral. This preparing of oneself for the responsibilities ahead, as liturgical dress is put on, is shown in some denominations where special prayers are said as each item is donned, prayers which remind the wearer of whose he/she is and what lies immediately ahead. This is not customary in the Uniting Church but being reminded visibly by what is worn and by the actions of putting it on, evokes a renewed consciousness that, beyond all else, the wearer is called to be a servant of the Lord.

A mark of service, not of status

That some say treat liturgical dress as a mark of superior rank or status clearly runs contrary to all of this. The temptation to so misuse such attire will be there always. But infatuation with rank or status is not restricted to those who wear liturgical dress. All of us should be aware of what we are doing and saying when we do or do not wear liturgical dress. Inevitably it will say something about us and there will always be the risks, as there is with our preaching, that what is heard is not what we intended by what we said or did.

Those charged to proclaim the gospel always need to hear it themselves. The informed and sensitive wearing of liturgical dress is one way in which they may be confronted with at least one aspect of the gospel, as they prepare to lead worship. No where is this summed up more succinctly than in Jesus' response to those who sought special status and to be ranked above their fellow disciples. So, in Mark 10: 41-45 we are reminded of our essential servant role, and of the need to avoid 'lording it' over others if we are to be followers of him who came

not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The various items of liturgical dress used in the Uniting Church had their origins in common articles of dress in the Roman Empire - along with some marks of rank. In the course of time these items gathered to themselves 'religious meaning' to the point where secular origins were forgotten or discounted.

So the alb, which provides attire common to everyone charged with liturgical leadership responsibilities, was seen to echo the 'white robes' of Revelation 3:4, 6:11 and 7:9, 13 and 14, those worn at Baptism in the first centuries of the Christian church.

The scarf and the stole have their widely accepted origins in the yoke which, though easy (Matt 11: 29 and 30) remains a symbol of service.

The pectoral cross or symbol points to whose we are and serve, while the girdle reminds us of that truth which is to be found in Christ and is ours, like all else, by grace alone (see John 1: 14 and 17 and Ephesians 6:14 and 2:8-10).

But beyond such connections liturgical dress stresses the 'servant role' of those who lead worship. They are distinguished not by varying idiosyncratic dress which stress self-effacing service, rather than self-aggrandisement.

Before the Uniting Church

Before union in 1977 ministers and other leaders of worship in the three uniting denominations varied in their practices. Amongst most, but not all ordained ministers, a black gown (often termed a Geneva gown) was commonly worn, as was the 'clerical collar' with or without 'preaching bands'. These items were combined by some with cassock, scarf or stole, and/or academic hood. It would appear that the scarf had its origin in a garment called a 'tippet' and certainly was in common use among Protestant ministers since the days of the Reformation. Originally black in colour, it was devoid of fringe or any ornamentation. The stole is of more ancient lineage and, in the colours of the liturgical year, was associated with the celebration of the sacraments. Both scarf and stole, in their origins, related to ordained ministers.

The fact that some form of liturgical dress was common among ordained ministers, and in a minimal way among 'home missionaries', meant that it came to be related to the ordained and/or pastoral ministry. Few, if any, lay or local preachers adopted such liturgical dress nor, on the whole, did deaconesses.

Prior to union one of the preparatory committees set up by the Joint Constitution Council was termed the 'Paraphernalia Committee'. It was charged with preparing recommendations on such things as:

- (i) certificates and forms to be used in the Uniting Church
- (ii) a symbol and motto for the Uniting Church
- (iii) liturgical dress.

It was the recommendation of this committee that the 'ecumenical alb' - in white or off-white - should replace the black gown. It was to be worn without the addition of an academic hood, by ministers of the Word, deaconesses and lay pastors. Stoles in liturgical colours were to be worn only by ministers of the Word. Where a blue scarf with the Uniting Church in Australia symbol at each end was preferred, deaconesses were to wear one of a lighter shade of blue to that of ministers of the Word. Chairpersons of Presbyteries, moderators of Synods, and

the president of the Assembly were to wear a scarf of a deeper shade of blue, suitably embroidered with the name of the council over which he/she presided. It was suggested further that as an identifying means the moderators' scarf should have, as the background to the Uniting Church in Australia symbol, a panel of silver cloth, and that of the president a panel of gold cloth.

Lay pastors were to wear the alb, but no Scarf. No recommendation was made for the liturgical dress of lay preachers, probably on the assumption that old customs would continue.

Since 1977...

In hindsight it is clear that while stoles were reserved to ministers of the Word and so could be understood as a sign of ordination the scarf served both as the latter (in the cases of ministers of the Word and deaconesses, and now deacons) - and as a sign of office for chairpersons, moderators and presidents - somewhat as did the scarf once worn by presidents of Conference in the Methodist Church.

So there was from the outset some ambiguity, not to say confusion, about the significance of the scarf.

In addition it was seen apparent that there was virtually no shade differences in the blue scarfs available commercially, and so no distinction was made between those worn by deaconesses and presidents, e.g. as far as colour was concerned.

The first president of the Assembly chose to wear neither an ecumenical alb nor the recommended blue scarf, but his doctor's academic gown and a specially designed scarf of greater symbolic and aesthetic appeal than that recommended by the committee.

Subsequently, when lay persons were elected as chairpersons, moderators and president, they chose to wear scarfs of office with or without gowns or albs. Such scarfs had a designatory function and ceased to have any necessary relation to lay or ordained 'status'.

The Guidelines of 1984

To reduce confusion and help understanding the Commission on Liturgy, in 1984, issued a statement on liturgical dress, which included the following guidelines for those who wear such dress.

(12) A UCA blue scarf appropriately may be worn with the alb by a ministers of the Word. Some ministers feel that they cannot justify the cost of purchasing a set of four liturgical stoles and see the scarf as an acceptable alternative.

The scarf may also be worn by deaconesses, lay pastors, lay preachers, other worship leaders and by lay people holding a particular office in the church. In some synods and presbyteries scarfs of a distinctive colour other than blue are used to indicate a specific office.

(13) The scarf is a strip of material of even width, gathered at its centre into a narrower width. The gathered section is placed across the back of the neck and, as with the stole, the scarf hangs to knee length. Usually the scarf is made of plain material (not brocade), it is not fringed and not embroidered with symbols. However, since the blue scarf is a distinctively UCA vestment, it may bear the UCA logo or other appropriate emblem, eg badge of a synod, presbytery, school or church organisation.

(14) A pectoral cross (one hung around the neck) appropriately may be worn with an alb, with and alb and stole

or scarf, or simply with street dress. In the UCA, in contrast to the episcopal churches, the wearing of pectoral cross does not denote that the person holds a particular office. It therefore may be worn in worship by ministers, deaconesses, lay pastors, lay preachers and other leaders of worship.

(15) In brief, the recommendations of the Commission on Liturgy are:

- [a] That an ecumenical alb, a UCA scarf, and a pectoral cross appropriately may be worn by all leaders of worship.
- [b] That liturgical stoles should be worn only by ordained ministers of the Word.

The 1992 Statements

The decisions of the 1991 Assembly required some additions to the 1984 guidelines, so that clause 15 (b) above, should now read:

- b. That liturgical stoles should be worn only by ordained ministers of the Word and deacons.

And there should be a new clause:

- c. A scarf should be worn around the neck and hang free in front. The same should apply to a stole when worn by a minister of the Word. Where a deacon wears a stole it should be worn diagonally over the left shoulder and fastened at the right hip.
- d. The stole is a symbol of ordination and the mode of wearing it a symbol of a particular ministry.

Faced with requests for further guidance the Commission throughout 1992 prepared a series of drafts, and in November of that year decided to issue:

- i) a succinct set of guidelines and a list of design norms for liturgical dress in the Uniting Church.
- ii) this statement to provide a rationale and historical background.

and

iii) to have for reference purposes a longer statement with full historical detail, references etc. which statement

would be of particular use to theological educators and libraries.

February 1993