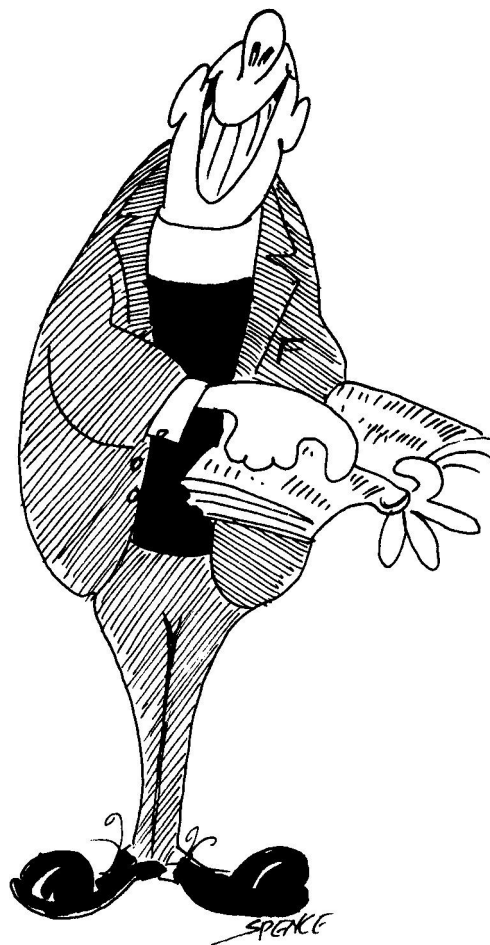


BLACKBIRDS AND BUDGERIGARS
A Critical History of Methodist Liturgical Dress
1786 – 1986

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HEALTH WARNING

This lecture contains many references to the minutiae of liturgical dress, and argues that there are appropriate and incorrect ways in which Methodist preachers might dress.

Those who are annoyed or distressed by such issues, or who think that the consideration of such trivia borders on the blasphemous, are advised to read no further.

Perhaps it is an advantage that from being blackbirds for two centuries, we now begin to look like budgerigars.

E Gordon Rupp (November 1985)

We bishops must be distinguished from the people and others by our learning not by our dress, by our life not our robes, by purity of heart not by elegance.

Pope Celestine I (AD 425)

On a celebrated Christmas morning in 1786 Thomas Coke landed in Antigua and met a Methodist preacher on his way to conduct a Methodist service. Coke wrote in his journal:

In going up to the town of St John's we met brother Baxter *in his band*, going to perform divine service. (Vickers 1969:151)

As John Vickers rightly notes, *in his band* was not a reference to John Baxter's companions, but to his clerical attire. John Baxter was not an Anglican priest. Why then was he dressed as a clergyman? Because, in the previous May, at Baltimore, this shipwright and local preacher from Chatham, England, had been ordained into the Methodist itinerancy, and as a deacon and elder in the Church of God, by Coke himself.

After Wesley's death in 1791, there were no less than five breeds of itinerant Methodist preachers on the stations. In the first instance there were men like James Creighton, who were already clergymen of the Church of England. In the second instance there were men such as Henry Moore, who had been ordained by Wesley himself. In the third instance there were men like Christopher Hopper, who had been ordained by Thomas Coke. In the fourth instance there were men like Samuel Bradburn and Alexander Kilham, who had been ordained by fellow Methodist preachers (not even in priest's orders), and in the final instance there were those who had not been ordained by anybody, but who were totally within the Methodist itinerancy and discipline.

All five categories of itinerants shared a common calling as Methodist preachers, and all five groups were soon exercising the privileges and responsibilities of the pastoral office among the local preachers and the members of the Methodist societies.

It is clear from the earliest portraits in the *Methodist Magazine* that, irrespective of ordination, all the early Methodist itinerants assumed a distinctive dress of stockings, breeches and black riding coat, with a white silk or linen clerical band folded and wrapped at the neck. This attire lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century, though the cut improved, and the outer coat became much higher and ampler in the continuous lapel. Denny Urlin wrote thus of the Methodist patriarch Father Reece in 1850:

His costume was that of the beginning of the century – coat with high collar, continuations and long stockings, resembling the costume of a QC when in court dress. He wore long gaiters, a hat low and wide-brimmed, like a bishop's, but of course without rosette or strings. He did not, like Wesley, wear silk stockings and shoe buckles. He had a cape for winter use, and a great cloke for outside wear on long mail coach journeys. He was one of the last who were never known to wear trousers; and two or

three of his elder brethren resembled him in dress. The next group – Dr Bunting, Newton, Hannah, Jackson and their compeers, conformed far more closely to modern usage. (Urlin 1899:54)

If Jabez Bunting did, finally, exchange stockings and breeches for trousers, he could hardly have worn out his first pair before his death in 1858!

Black coats and waistcoats with white shirts and white band or loose white bow were also worn by Primitive Methodists such as Hugh Bourne and William Clowes; by Bible Christians such as William O'Bryan; and by UMFC ministers such as James Everett and Robert Eckett.

By the late 1860s many portraits indicate the arrival of the black cassock-fronted waistcoat with a white bow-tie. For most Wesleyans, and for a number of other Methodist preachers, the white bow-tie of the 1860s was replaced by a single stiff white collar. By the 1880s some Wesleyans were already wearing the present-day double white Roman clerical collar. Other Wesleyans retained the white shirt and white bow-tie for many years afterwards, and their non-Wesleyan colleagues often took to a black bow-tie.

Unless they were in Anglican orders, most of the itinerant preachers, even in the early days of Methodism, wore the same clerical costume in the pulpit and sanctuary as they wore in the study and the street. However, there were some notable exceptions.

In the summer of 1792 Samuel Bradburn, who had been ordained earlier that year at the Manchester District Meeting by three of Wesley's preachers, left the London Conference for his new appointment in Bristol. On 26 August 1792 Bradburn and a colleague conducted the opening services of Portland Chapel. At the request of the trustees, who were somewhat at variance with the High Church trustees of what we now call the New Room, Bradburn and his colleague wore gown and bands, and read the slightly abridged liturgy in surplices.

On 7 September, the vicar of Westbury-on-Trym published a twenty-page pamphlet objecting to the chapel, its ministrations and its mode of worship within his own parish. On 22 September Bradburn issued a thirty-page reply (Lambert 1929:32 and 34). This was followed by a pamphlet from six of the trustees of the New Room, who disowned the events at Portland Chapel. The Bristol preachers and the Portland trustees took their stand with Bradburn, and soon the controversy was the subject of Methodist connexional gossip and speculation (Blanshard 1871:146).

At the Leeds Conference of 1793 a debate on the issue resulted in two resolutions:

Q32 Are there any directions to be given concerning the dress of our Preachers?

A No gowns, cassocks, bands, or surplices, shall be worn by any. (Minutes 1812:277)

The *any* clearly referred to the whole itinerancy, for the next resolution read:

Q33 Is any direction to be given concerning titles and distinctions?

A1 The title *Reverend* shall not be used by us towards each other in future.

A2 The distinction between ordained and unordained Preachers shall be dropped. (Minutes 1812:278)

When Thomas Blanshard wrote Bradburn's biography in 1869, he rejoiced in the 1793

Conference resolutions forbidding gowns, cassocks, bands and surplices, and observed:

This old rule is still in force, and it is wonderfully effective in keeping the Methodist pulpit free from priestly flunkeyism. (Blanshard 1871:149)

However, Bradburn and a number of his contemporaries and successors took a different line. In December 1793 Bradburn wrote to Alexander Kilham, who had worn gown and bands across the border, at the request of the Methodists in Aberdeen, and gave Kilham some prophetic advice:

Do not destroy your gown and bands, nor suppose they are for ever done with. (Blanshard 1871:152)

Only seven years later, in 1800, Robert Newton was stationed as a Methodist preacher in Glasgow, and his biographer, Thomas Jackson, relates the following tale:

Mr Newton arrived in Glasgow on the Saturday and was to preach the next morning. He was given to understand that he was expected to appear in the pulpit with his gown and bands – appendages to which he had hitherto been unaccustomed. At that time he dispensed with the gown but the bands were deemed necessary for he would otherwise be regarded as a mere Licentiate ... A pair of bands was therefore borrowed for the occasion of a neighbouring clergyman; and in the course of the following week Mrs Newton exercised her skill in providing him with a pair of his own. (Jackson 1855:41)

The wheel came full circle forty-six years later, when the Wesleyan Conference was bombarded with complaints from the Methodist laity of Glasgow against the preachers who insisted on wearing their gowns! (Gregory 1898:398)

Poor Robert Newton, having at first refused to wear a gown in Scotland (he later did) (Gregory 1898:333), found himself the subject of the same issue at the Newcastle Wesleyan Conference forty years on. For in 1840 Newton became President of the Conference, and the Methodist ladies of Newcastle had made a Presidential gown! Jabez Bunting was all for the President having a special gown, but, sensing the mood of the Conference, he subdued his own inclinations and moved the previous question. (It is interesting to note that, in the 1950s, for a short time, while the likes of Sangster, Soper and Weatherhead occupied the President's chair, there was a fashion in the Methodist Conference for the Scottish moderator's gown, bedecked as it was with multitudinous tapes and tassels. What Bunting would have made of later developments in this direction it is fearsome to speculate.)

At the same Newcastle Conference of 1840 the gown question was raised a second time, in relation to the Wesleyan School Chapel in Sheffield. This time Bunting spoke up for the gown, and declared that he had himself worn a gown in some of the London chapels, and had seen brothers Benson and Rodda doing the same, and he knew it to be worn on the overseas stations. It was held by a number of preachers that the motion forbidding the use of gowns had been rescinded in the course of the debate (Ward 1976:258).

Rescinded or not, the rule became a matter of some importance to the superintendent of the Hull West Circuit in the months following the Conference, for in February 1841 one of his preachers, Samuel Waddy, having recently moved from the Sheffield Circuit and School to Hull West, appeared in the Waltham Street pulpit in cassock,

gown and bands (Waddy 1878:130).

On the same day, young William Bunting had assumed similar attire in the pulpit of the Cheetham Hill Chapel in Manchester. The whole matter at Hull West developed into a four-cornered contest, involving Samuel Waddy, his circuit superintendent, the District Meeting and the Conference of 1841.

A prominent Hull schoolmaster, Charles Welch, wrote a fifty-page pamphlet (Welch 1841) against Waddy's donning of the gown and bands at Waltham Street, but, as Jabez Bunting wrote to William Lord:

It is read with some avidity and will make some impression, though it is I think a failure. He wishes to excite jealousy among Local Preachers, but that portion of the pamphlet is too obscure to be generally understood without an interpreter. (Ward 1976:253)

When the Hull West issue reached the Wesleyan Conference of 1841 none could decide who had the best of the dispute, so a committee was appointed to report back later in the Conference. The committee recommended:

That all the brethren should desist from wearing the gown without the express sanction of the Conference, and that all the brethren now stationed in the Hull West circuit should be removed. (Gregory 1898:305)

At the next Conference the curt rule of 1793 was inserted in the Large Minutes:

No gowns, cassocks, bands or surplices shall be worn by any. (Gregory 1898:306)

The issue increased in absurdity for, at the very same 1842 Conference, the members voted by a massive majority to sanction gown and bands for the Methodist preachers in Scotland!

At the next Conference, at the putting of the traditional question as to whether there were any objections to any brother, the reply came:

W H Rule has worn a gown. (Gregory 1898:341)

Brother Rule's retort was that, having worn the gown in Methodist work abroad, he thought fit to wear it at home.

Notwithstanding the fact that Rule then heard the Conference decree that English preachers would be expelled for wearing the gown, he continued to go his own way. The young C H Kelly tells of his embarrassment as assistant to W H Rule, in their army chaplain days in the early 1860s:

(W H Rule) insisted on the use of the Liturgy at parade services – He wore his gown and bands not only when himself in reading desk and pulpit, but as he sat in front of me when I officiated ...

At certain services, such as weddings, churchings, etc, he wore a surplice. There we parted company. He wished me to do the same and also to put on the white (sic) for Baptism and the Lord's Supper. I declined. I was willing to wear gown and bands because, as officers and men alike were required to come to service in full regimentals it seemed to be anomalous that the chaplain should be the only one in plain clothes. When he found my opposition to wear the surplice so strong the doctor yielded. I knew that the wearing of any vestment was contrary to the declared rules of the

Conference and when on another matter I told him he was acting against Connexional rule he smilingly said, 'I know it my dear Sir. For many years I have acted against many rules in Methodism but *one* – that *one* am I – W H Rule!' (Kelly 1910:111)

In the midst of the gown controversy of the 1840s, one needs to set Jabez Bunting's somewhat cruel remarks about Samuel Waddy over against Waddy's own defence for wearing cassock, gown and bands. Bunting's presumption was harsh and pithy:

What an inextinguishable itching there must be in the Governor's body for the sacerdotal. (Ward 1976:314)

Waddy, on the other hand, set about a defence of his actions with logic and courtesy, and put forward reasons which, even now, repay careful study.

Firstly:

A minister should not attract attention to himself or be the object of remarks because he has either too much or too little current fashion about his dress. The officiating dress of a minister should be uniform and unchangeable.

Secondly:

The sanction of universal practice should not lightly be dismissed.

Thirdly:

Even if Mr Wesley's travelling preachers were unordained helpers in the early days of the Methodist societies they are now ordained ministers of a distinct church and should adopt the outward symbols of their office.

Fourthly:

The assumption of outward garb by Methodist ministers is highly desirable in order to assert the ministerial office within Methodism in the light of recent Puseyite pretensions that Methodist ministers have no status in the universal church.

Fifthly:

The office and rights of a regular and separated ministry need to be asserted over against the low and levelling views of some contemporary Methodists. (Waddy 1878:130)

We have now traced clerical dress and gown and bands across Wesleyan Methodism in a more or less unbroken line, beginning with John Baxter in 1786. It included Samuel Bradburn and Alexander Kilham in the 1790s, Robert Newton in the early 1800s, Samuel Waddy, William Bunting and the Scottish preachers in the 1840s, and W H Rule in the 1860s. The unbroken link in the next generation comes through such men as C H Kelly and T B Stephenson. The latter was photographed in cassock, gown and the thin, old-fashioned Anglican black scarf, at the turn of the century.

The rest of the story stands within living memory. The more formal of the Wesleyan ministers took to the clerical frock-coat with high buttoned cassock-waistcoat or stock with the linen or stiff plastic clerical collar. (This fashion was maintained by most of the Presidents after Methodist Union, and was broken by Kenneth Waight as late as 1971.)

It was also in the 1970s that white shirts and clerical black stocks began to give way

to the sports jacket and the clerical shirt. At first it was black shirts and stiff plastic collars. The downward spiral continued with the tunnel shirt and the plastic insert, and reached an all-time low with the demise of the stiff white plastic collar, and the introduction of the soft white collar, which, at its second and subsequent wearing, loses all semblance to a circle and bends itself to the warmth and contours of its owner's neck and chin. This abomination is now attached not only to grey shirts, but to shirts of vivid blue, chocolate brown and various shades of mushroom and pea-green. Not only do these commercial or home-made clerical shirts bear no resemblance to the outdoor dress of the traditional Western presbyter, but they are often ill-matched to the suits with which they are worn.

It is now possible to see the holy mysteries of the faith presided over by a Methodist minister in a brown suit, a light green shirt, a soft, bent and defeated collar, brown shoes and a short open black preaching gown. How one longs for the smartly dressed Baptist minister, wearing his collar and tie and his charismatic smile.

Not content with discarding black stocks and black shirts, a number of the coloured-shirt brigade have begun to invest their coloured shirts and stocks with meaning. Not the least of the problems of those who try to adapt their shirts to the liturgical seasons is that in Advent and Lent they are wrongly taken to be bishops! One Methodist minister in Yorkshire invites the brides at his weddings to choose the colour of his shirt!



The great era of gown-wearing after Methodist Union was in the 1950s. Ron Gibbins tells how, when he went to Middlesbrough in 1950, he was the only member of the circuit staff to wear a gown. When he left seven years later all eight members of staff were wearing gowns.

In the sixties ministers began, by the dozen, to wear cassocks under their gowns. The cassock-gown, with its own cincture front, was a seemly and utility version of the same thing; University or college hoods, with or without the black preaching scarf or tippet, were now added by many to the cassock, gown and bands. A few idiosyncratic ministers began to wear the hood or scarf (or both) without a gown.

Cross-fertilization with Anglicans and American Methodists now brought the coloured sacramental stoles into Methodism. Alas!

Many ministers, bereft of any

guidance in the matter, either wore the wrong colour on the wrong Sunday, or wore an

inappropriate colour all the year round, or, worse still, wore a sacramental stole with an academic hood! Not a few ministers, supposing the black sacramental stole to be a churchy version of the black preaching scarf, appeared at weddings and ecumenical gatherings in a vestment worn only by High Anglicans and old-fashioned Romans for Good Friday and Masses for the Dead!

Trinkets for the bazaar were now complete with the introduction of grey cassocks, and pectoral, bronchial and duodenal crosses.

It was now possible to see a Methodist minister in a grey cassock, with his bright blue tunnel shirt still showing above his bands, wearing a black gown, a green stole and a pectoral cross. The blackbird had been eaten by the budgerigar!

Black cassocks began to be spurned on the spurious argument that black was an unsuitable colour for celebration. This was a somewhat curious argument, especially as it often emanated from the quarter that so keenly, and rightly, sponsored the cause of the black half of the human race.

Through most of his years as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches Philip Potter was seen sporting the black cassock, with MA gown and preaching bands.



In the matter of liturgical dress, the advent of women ministers has added chaos to confusion. It has been a case of every woman for herself.

Some have taken to clerical blouses and collars, and to cassocks, gowns and bands. Others have settled for lay blouses with skirts, or suits, or dresses, and a gown. Others have invented often impressive, but nevertheless highly individualistic, garments which can carry only the liturgical significance invested in them by the wearer. One notes that Anglican deaconesses, women lay-readers, lady parish workers, and women priests elsewhere in the Anglican communion, do not seem to have made quite the same meal out of this challenge as many Methodist women ministers have done.

In the last decade a new garment has come to the rescue of both male and female Methodist ministers in the shape of the cassock-alb. Worn in white or an oatmeal colour, this garment, accompanied by a stole, at once unites us with a growing trend among Roman, Anglican, Lutheran,

Reformed and Methodist presbyters, both in Europe and overseas. The subtle variety

in the material and shape of the cassock-alb is most readily seen in a Vanpouille's catalogue, but other firms are similarly obliging.

Whilst it is true that a light grey cassock or front-buttoning preaching gown in light grey is but a stone's throw away from a cassock-alb, these garments encourage a trend unlikely to catch on in the rest of Western Christendom.

Before we reach some recommendations and conclusions, it is perhaps worth pointing out that some of the most idiosyncratic erosions into any existing Methodist traditions in liturgical dress have come from our Connexional representatives. No one doubts that these innovations can be justified in the minds of the wearers, but they leave many grass root and ecumenical observers not a little bewildered.

Just as there are general principles governing the content of a sermon or a preaching service, so there exist some general principles governing liturgical dress. Whilst it is true that these principles have been held in much higher regard by, say, Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians, nevertheless if Methodists are going to dress up, let them at least understand the underlying principles of the system.

The whole purpose of liturgical dress is that, like church music and Christian drama, it should glorify God and lead the worshippers in an upward sweep to God, rather than draw attention to any particular individual.

It is true, of course, that from time to time there have been modifications in liturgical dress (such as the dropping of the maniple from the Mass vestments, the disappearance of black gloves for Reformed ministers at funerals, and the abandonment of brocades in favour of plainer materials for stoles and chasubles); but liturgical dress has not normally been modified or altered or re-designed in every generation, and certainly not by each individual at whim. British musketeers no longer wear white stockings and breeches, and British bobbies no longer wear top-hats, but no musketeer or bobby would turn up for duty sporting his own private modifications of the official uniform. Someone will argue that liturgical dress is not a uniform. Nonetheless, once ministers or preachers forsake ordinary clothes for a distinctive garb, the principle of the uniform comes into operation, for if it does not, the entire exercise is pointless, and degenerates into dressing up for dressing up's sake.

Contrary to previous custom, there is now, in fact, very little symbolism attached to any item of liturgical dress, and any symbolism still lingering about is probably better forgotten. The governing principles are tradition, custom, shape, colour-coding and aesthetics.

English-speaking academic dress, for ordained and lay preachers alike, is fixed, and goes entirely by shape and colour-coding.

Liturgical colour-coding is quite different from academic colour-coding, and probably only overlaps for doctors' red robes on red letter days. (This is an issue which is hardly of universal interest to the rank and file of Mr Wesley's preachers; though an astute observer might conclude that it was the Doctors of Divinity among the second generation of Wesley's preachers around whom the nineteenth century gown controversy in Wesleyan Methodism centred.)

The colour-coding for cassocks in the Western church has normally indicated ecclesiastical status. In Britain purple denotes a bishop, red denotes a Queen's chaplain, blue denotes a deaconess, and brown and grey have long been claimed by the Franciscans, which leaves the humble Western presbyter with black. If a presbyter

dons a cassock of some other hue, no rule is being broken, but undue attention is immediately drawn to the wearer, and, in an ecumenical context, people want to know what it means, and the answer is that it doesn't mean anything. It is just different, and erodes the principle of a uniform.

Those Methodist presbyters who are seized by the rainbow syndrome have plenty of opportunity to abandon black *inside* the sanctuary by adopting the traditional colour-coding of the broad sacramental stoles over a plain white or oatmeal coloured cassock-alb. The whole point of the rainbow is that it is universally recognizable, because the same colours appear in the correct sequence upon every single occasion!

The consistency argument also applies to pectoral crosses. Whilst it is true that, in the Eastern churches, the pectoral cross often denotes a presbyter, in the Western church the pectoral cross denotes a bishop, an abbot or a member of a religious community, and can become slightly pretentious at ecumenical gatherings, when sported on the chest of a Free Church minister.

By way of a personal plea to Methodist preachers, ministerial and lay, I offer the following suggestions in conclusion.

In the first instance, there is a perfectly respectable Free Church, non-Wesleyan, British Baptist and American Methodist tradition that implies that a minister should wear lay dress in church, and this precludes even the wearing of the clerical collar. This practice accords with the first centuries of the early church. Strictly speaking, the anti-dressing-up lobby should not be seen in church sporting the outdoor dress of a present-day Roman or Anglican clergyman.

A second choice is surely, by now, the traditional dress of the British non-episcopal and reformed churches. The basic garment is a black cassock with a leather belt, or with a cincture, which is more seemly and kinder to the cassock.

The cassock is an under or an outdoor garment, and as such has its own dignity. It can also be worn by organists and choristers (even in black), and there is no real warrant for, or meaning in, ministers wearing it for public worship without a priest's gown, and certainly not without bands.

The preaching bands, as in all eighteenth century portraits and engravings, should be short and broad rather than long and narrow. Furthermore, they should be made or purchased in such a form that they rest side by side, and do not stick out at right angles to each other, like a pair of six-inch rulers that have fallen out with one another. Until ecclesiastical outfitters reach the standard of Eade and Ravenscroft they should be boycotted in favour of the said robe-makers. In accordance with a long-established Presbyterian tradition, bands are not worn by probationer ministers.

The black preaching gown, or priest's gown, in its fullest form has sleeves that are gathered back inside as far as the elbow. These are still made by ecclesiastical outfitters, and such a pudding-sleeve gown can be seen on Charles Wesley as he stands outside the New Room in Bristol. The plainer black preaching gown is a perfectly acceptable alternative, but needs to be generously made. (Gone now are the days before college hoods, when the Methodist theological colleges added red or purple piping and inside ribbons to their ministers' gowns!)

The so-called Geneva gown is nothing of the kind, and any connection with the lay gowns of the Scottish and Continental Reformation is largely untraceable.

The graduate's gown, in its bachelor's, master's or doctor's style, is a seemly

alternative to the preaching gown, or priest's gown, but its appropriateness at the Eucharist is questionable.

The black scarf, or tippet, should be plain and broad. It should be folded or gathered at the neck, and not cut or shaped like the sacramental stole, nor should it be pinked with scissors at the end.

The mounting of armorial crests on the ends of the scarf is not necessary, and might properly be reserved for chaplains to Her Majesty's Forces and Presidents. Embroidered crosses and other Christian symbols belong to the traditional sacramental stoles, and have no real history on the ends of preaching scarves or tippets.

If local preachers are mindful of wearing a tippet, or preaching scarf, with a preaching gown or academic gown, then the traditional Anglican colour for this is light or French blue, and Wippells will oblige.

A university or college hood on the back of a preacher is an English-speaking protestant phenomenon. Like the academic gown, its appropriateness at the Eucharist is questionable. When it is worn, the front of the hood goes over the bands, and not under them. The cassock button provided for the hood by most ecclesiastical tailors needs to be removed, and re-sewn about an inch from the top of the cassock, so that the bands are seen only below the front of the hood, and not above it as well.

It is now the scarf and the bands which denote the ministerial office. Gowns, hoods and cassocks can be worn by anyone in choir habit.

For much less outlay, for increasingly common usage across the traditions, and for ease of transport, there is reason to hope that the cassock-alb with stole will eventually replace both the traditional dress of the Reformed clergy, and all those idiosyncratic variations upon it that we have hitherto rehearsed. By itself the cassock-alb is not a presbyteral garment, and needs to be worn with a stole. If one stole is to be worn all the year round it can match the cassock-alb, or be of a woven patterned material, with a white or cream background.

The only problem with one all-purpose stole is that it may require some explanation in ecumenical gatherings in Advent, or Lent, or at Pentecost. Nevertheless there is much to be said for it in a circuit where the minister is presiding in so many different chapels. The liturgical sequence of colours is soon lost in a country circuit, and ends up satisfying no one but the wearer.

As Percy Dearmer said in a later edition of *The Parson's Handbook* (first published in 1899):

It will clear the ground if we consider first the question of colours.

Although there is still great confusion on this subject and almost universal misunderstanding, the question is, in the light of recent research, a simple one, and one also about which the experts are now fully agreed. The use of liturgical colours for different seasons and different classes of saints' days, though very useful and beautiful, is of comparatively late development, and is almost wholly Western. It arose by slow degrees early in the Middle Ages; but in the average pre-Reformation parish church there was no such hard and fast rule about colours as we are accustomed to now. Men moved little from place to place in those days, and even the strangest local peculiarities caused no confusion. (Dearmer 1899 [1931]:103)

The generally accepted pattern for changing the liturgical colours of stoles in the Western church is now as follows:

White is worn from Christmas Day until the Sunday after the Epiphany, on Maundy Thursday, from Easter Day until the end of Ascensiontide, on Trinity Sunday, for all feasts of our Lord and of his Mother, for Baptisms, Weddings and Saints' Days, sometimes for funerals, and is appropriate for Chapel Anniversaries.

Red is worn in honour of the Holy Spirit for Pentecost week; for our Lord's Passion from Palm Sunday to Good Friday (excluding Maundy Thursday), for Confirmations and Ordinations, in honour of those saints and apostles who died as martyrs, and is appropriate for Covenant Sunday.

Violet is worn in the solemn and preparatory seasons, during Advent and from Ash Wednesday until the day before Palm Sunday, and sometimes for funerals.

Green is worn, outside the two great festival and preparatory periods, when no other provision is made.

The normal colour of the season is used at Harvest.

The stole is shaped at the neck in its traditional form, and not gathered at the neck like a scarf or tippet. Modern stoles are often broad and unshaped, and have a cord or chain stitched across them so that they sit properly on the back of the neck.

Modern stoles tend to be of woven fabrics and plain colours, and to carry a different range of symbols from earlier days. It is as well to know this before rushing headlong to the ecclesiastical tat shops.

Again, by far the most impressive range of stoles is that provided by Vanpouille's, and their catalogue should be carefully scrutinised, for ideas even if not for orders!

It is now fifteen years since Donald Rogers became the first British Methodist minister to wear full Eucharistic vestments, including alb and chasuble. No one would be surprised that this was at an MSF gathering in the Little Chapel at Kingsway Hall, which had already been the scene of a private Tractarian revival.

But the trimmings of the Tractarian revival are not Methodism's greatest need. Only a fool would pretend that an outward garment of any sort could bring the Kingdom of God one step nearer. For all our dressing up, Methodist ministers are still Mr Wesley's preachers, and we are in duty bound to remember that we have, in the end, nothing to do but save souls. Yet, for better or for worse, we are now also true presbyters of the universal church.

It does not harm the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ one whit if we dress like traditional Christian presbyters and preachers. If we do so, however, let us get it right. For in so far as these things mattered to Mr Wesley at all, he would have got it right, and probably seen to it that we did as well.

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