

Department of Liturgics

Commission on Worship

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Should Lutheran pastors wear vestments or not?

Our Situation

Even though Lutheran pastors have customarily worn vestments when they have led their people in worship, some pastors have in recent times chosen to conduct public worship without any vestments.

Three reasons are given for this rejection of traditional practice. Vestments set the clergy apart from the laity and so convey notions of superior status and rank. Vestments are said to be alien to the unchurched in Australia and to alienate Christians from other denominations. They therefore hamper outreach to the unchurched in worship. Pastors justify their rejection of vestments by claiming that Christ and his apostles did not command the wearing of them.

The Reason for the Use of Vestments

Lutherans have always held that the efficacy of worship does not depend on the regalia of the celebrant, but on the word of Christ which institutes and empowers the divine service. Since the use of vestments is neither bidden nor forbidden by our Lord, they have the status of a liturgical adiaphoron, something that is permitted for use in worship but is not always required. They have been introduced into the church for the sake of “good order, Christian education and evangelical propriety” (*Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration*, 1X,7).

At the Reformation the Lutheran church continued to use the traditional vestments of the western church, for, unlike some other Protestant denominations who forbade everything that Christ had not instituted, it preserved most traditional catholic practices, provided that they had not been forbidden and were consistent with the gospel (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, 27,1). The Lutheran position is put well in *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, XV, 51: “Nothing should be changed in the accustomed rites without good reason, and to foster harmony those ancient customs should be kept which can be kept without sin or without great disadvantage.”

Liturgical vestments have traditionally been used in the Lutheran Church for the following reasons.

- By their symbolism they portray the nature and function of the ministry of word and sacrament as it is exercised by the pastor in public worship.
- They express the solidarity of the pastor with all other pastors of the LCA as well as the pastors of the Lutheran churches throughout the world.

- They identify the pastor ecumenically with the ministers of those main line churches which hold that the office of the public ministry is divinely instituted for the preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments.
- Vestments contribute to appropriate liturgical conduct by de-emphasising the personality of the pastor and highlighting the office of the celebrant as the representative of Christ in the congregation (see *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, VII and VIII, 47-48).
- When lay people assist the pastor in the service, the vestments identify their wearer to visitors as the pastor of the congregation.

The Implications of the Rejection of Vestments by Lutheran Pastors

While it may be conceded that some pastors of the LCA have abandoned vestments for what appears to be good reasons, they may also not be aware of the implications of their position. Their action may be interpreted as revolutionary gesture by which they dissociate themselves from their predecessors in the congregation and their fellow pastors in the LCA. It may also be understood by some members as rejection of the traditional view of the office of the ministry in favour of the teaching that the pastor is merely the representative of the congregation.

Their action may create severe problems in the congregations after they leave, if their successors wish to reintroduce the use of these traditional vestments. What's more, the willingness to forego the use of vestments may determine the eligibility of subsequent pastors for a call to that congregation.

Since vestments of some kind, and increasingly the alb, are used by ministers in all mainline denominations, the pastors who do not use vestments will be aligning and identifying themselves, their ministry, and that congregation with those anti-catholic and anti-sacramental bodies that reject the divinely instituted office of the ministry.

Since vestments are intended to express the nature and limits of the pastor's authority publicly and ritually, the rejection of them may lead to confusion in the minds of members about the nature and extent of his authority. This could, in turn, lead either to fostering of a personality cult or to inappropriate assertions of authority apart from the ministry of word and sacrament.

Those pastors that reject the use of vestments still have to decide how to dress and what to wear when they lead in worship. In our society we have a very elaborate and clearly articulated code of dress by which people signal their status as well as their identification with particular subgroups or dissociation from them. So no matter how the pastor dresses liturgically, he will be seen to associate himself publicly with some people and to dissociate himself from others. The advantage of vestments and clerical dress is that it is socially and culturally neutral. They are, in a sense, countercultural and trans-cultural. With their use of vestments pastors do not identify themselves culturally with any single sub-class or represent any one group of people. Rather, they identify themselves with his fellow pastors who represent Christ and the gospel to all classes of people.

The rejection of vestments is regarded by some proponents of church growth as a

necessary condition for effective outreach. The danger is that this assumption, in practice, all too easily becomes an unproven and unquestioned requirement, a new law that must be observed. Where that is the case, we may do well to follow Luther's example. When Carlstadt rejected the use of traditional vestments as idolatrous and appeared in the pulpit in street dress, Luther deliberately countered his demands by dressing up in all the vestments that were available in the vestry of his church in Wittenberg.

Pastors are not called to be lone rangers but are ordained into the ministry of the gospel. They serve as ministers together with all pastors in the ministry of the LCA and of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. They therefore would do well not to act individually or carelessly in a blanket rejection of vestments, but to act synodically and ecumenically in the way that they dress as they lead the church in its worship of the triune God.