
LITURGICAL VESTMENTS AND THE ALB

Adopted by the Commission on Worship, August 1988. The Department of Liturgics prepared the statement in response to questions by pastors about the alb and appropriate liturgical vestments. The Department of Visual Arts helped with details for the design of the alb.

Reformatted and revised: 8 May 1998

Historical background

- 1 Christian worship depends on the word of God and the actions prescribed by the Lord of the church, not on celebrants and what they wear.
- 2 It seems that in the early Christian church celebrants wore normal civil dress, but as dress fashions changed the dress of celebrants remained the same and became recognised as ‘liturgical’.
- 3 As church hierarchy developed and different levels of clergy had different functions, the various celebrants wore specific liturgical vestments.
- 4 Celebrants also began to vary the vestments they wore for special acts within the rites of the church.
- 5 In recent times, churches which had previously not used liturgical vestments have tended to introduce them, while churches which had previously used elaborate vestments have modified them.

Reasons for liturgical vestments

- 1 By their symbolism, vestments indicate the nature and function of the ministry in worship.
- 2 Vestments contribute to proper liturgical conduct by de-emphasising the individuality and highlighting the office of the celebrant in the ritual.
- 3 Where a number of celebrants officiate, differences in their vestments help to distinguish their various roles, and so contribute to the order of the rite and help people to understand it.
- 4 Where celebrants who perform a specific function wear uniform vestments, both in a denomination and from one denomination to another, participants in worship are more likely to understand the roles of the celebrants.

Recommendations for liturgical vestments

- 1 For services with holy communion, we recommend one of the following forms of vestment for presiding clergy.

- An **alb** (a long loose-fitting white garment, reaching to the ankles, either loose or girded at the waist, and with sleeves, worn either over a cassock or without a cassock); and a **stole** (a narrow cloth, draped around the neck of the celebrant and reaching to slightly below his knees); in addition, a **chasuble** may be worn for the Lord's supper, particularly at festivals (Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity)
 - *OR*
 - A **cassock**, **surplice**, and **stole**, provided that the surplice is ample in length and serves, as it was meant to serve, as an alb with 'overcoat'
 - *OR*
 - The traditional black **gown** (talar) with **bands**.
- 2 The stole, worn either crossed in front or straight down (but not sash-like as for deacons in some denominations), is generally regarded as the distinguishing mark of the ordained clergy.
- 3 For minor services which do not include any of the special functions of the ordained ministry, the cassock with or without surplice may be worn.
- 4 To distinguish between the roles of various officiants in a service, the following vestments may be worn:
- for clergy — as above
 - for choir, organist, lectors — cassock (and surplice), or alb
 - for acolytes — cassock or alb.
- 5 Congregations are encouraged to buy their own sets of stoles so that their design is consistent with the paraments in the church.

The alb

- 1 We recommend the alb because of historical precedent and growing acceptance in churches nowadays.
- 2 The alb probably has its origin in the tunic worn in the Middle East in New Testament times (see Matt 10:10; Luke 3:11; John 19:23; also Rev 1:13) and by upper-class Romans. Its use as a liturgical vestment is very ancient.
- 3 It is the basic liturgical vestment worn throughout the Christian church (both East and West).
- 4 There are two main styles of alb:
- one which fastens in the centre, sometimes called the Roman alb
 - one which fastens at the right side, called the Sarum or ecumenical alb.
- 5 The colour of the alb is white. (Its name is derived from *alba*, the Latin word for white.)

It is preferable that the alb not be off-white. Because of the biblical and liturgical symbolism of white, especially for garments (see Matt 17:2; Mark 9:3; Rev 3:5; 7:9; 15:6; also the Canons of Hippolytus), from early times celebrants tried to achieve genuine whiteness for their albs.

Although garments of other colours, such as red or blue, are sometimes popularly referred to as 'albs', it would be better if they were referred to by other names, such as choir robes or acolytes' robes. These are more like cassocks, which were originally street garments and not liturgical robes.

- 6 Until recently, the material that has generally been used for the alb is linen, which is a natural material. However, although natural materials are generally preferred in worship, synthetic materials are now being widely used for the alb; many prefer them because they are more easily cared for.
- 7 An important function of the alb is to de-emphasise the person and elevate the office of the celebrant, and so it will cover as much of the celebrant as possible. A well-made alb will at least reach to, and preferably cover, the ankles.
- 8 The sleeves of the alb (in contrast to those of the surplice) are narrow, but wide enough to cover the sleeves of clothes worn underneath. Ornamented cuffs are not necessary.
- 9 Albs have traditionally been fastened with cloth-covered buttons (on the outside) and tapes (on the inside). However, modern fasteners such as zips and velcro are now also being used.
- 10 The folds in albs vary. The Sarum style (see 4 above) normally has folds at the sides and a plain front and rear. The Roman style allows for pleating at the rear.
- 11 A number of attachments may be worn with the alb.
 - The **cincture** (cord) is a long rope, usually white, but also in colours, mostly of the church year. It is fastened round the waist and its ends hang loosely from a knot tied at the hip. Alternatively, the cincture may be a belt-like band, also fastened at the hip; or the alb may be worn without any cincture. The rope-style of cincture may be used to hold the stole in place by tying it as follows: Wrap it once around the waist and fasten it with a reef knot at the centre in front; then form loops on each side of the centre knot with the two loose ends, by tying them to the cincture at the hips and letting the ends hang loosely down each side; the two loops hold the stole against the alb on each side at the front.
 - The **amice** is a rectangular neck-cloth traditionally worn to prevent the alb from contacting the neck. When the celebrant vests, he lays the amice across the top of his head, with its two long tapes hanging down the front. The tapes are crossed over each other under his chin and then passed under the arms. They are tied at the back, or if long enough, wrapped around the waist and tied at the front. When the alb is put on, the amice is slid back to its position round the neck and throat.
 - The **hood** has in some circles recently replaced the amice. It has, however, traditionally been either a separate garment worn on special occasions, or part of a monastic garment called a cowl or part of a liturgical garment called a cope. If a hood is preferred, it may be detachable. It may also be used to cover the head of the celebrant when he officiates outdoors.
- 12 The alb may be worn without amice or hood. If so, a specially shaped stole may be used.
- 13 When vesting, the celebrant first puts on the amice (if it is worn), then the alb, then the cincture, and finally the stole. In Lutheran circles, the stole is worn straight down from the shoulders, either hanging free, or behind the cincture, or passed through the cincture loops (see 11).
- 14 There is no need for Lutherans to give spiritual significance to vestments or to offer prayers during vesting — although there is no harm in knowing that, historically, liturgical vestments have been given various symbolic meanings, eg the amice, good works; the alb, purity; the cincture, discretion; the chasuble, charity. Lutheran celebrants prepare themselves to lead worship with the word of God and prayer for a clean heart, a clear mind, and a right spirit.

Note: Appropriate albs and patterns are available from The Open Book.