

## **For DEWCOM – Women’s perspectives on vestments document – Jeanette Krige.**

In his paper for DEWCOM, Tim Attwell defines clerical vestments as “the distinctive clothes normally worn by preachers and ministers as they conduct services”. Having been asked to consider a women’s perspective, some reflections on this matter appear below.

### History

We need to begin by recognising that the norm for clerical and preaching attire has been distinctly masculine, traditional Eurocentric styles that have not changed much over centuries. Women have only fairly recently been admitted to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament and male dress decorum rules have been carried over to include them, possibly indicating an acceptance of women only if they dress traditionally as their male counterparts. All ministers have to begin as local preachers. Recently the MCSA Local Preachers Association has rejected the gown and adopted the preaching coat, or manel, as the uniform for all local preachers, men and women alike. This long black coat, dating from pre-Victorian English fashion, is presently only worn by a few undertakers and Methodist local preachers. This 18<sup>th</sup> century, colonial garment designed specifically for men, is proudly called the “John Wesley coat” by many local preachers. In addition to the manel, many women include black hats as an integral part of their preaching uniform, entrenching a fundamentalist interpretation of the Scriptures dealing with the veiling of women.

### Male Attire

Preachers of European descent often object to the manel, as outdated and status-seeking. In Circuit 902 we agreed that in order to assist unity amongst local preachers we allow those who do not wish to wear the manel to dress in black and white in the pulpit. This is seen as a sign of respect for those who feel deeply about their uniform. Personally I feel it is a great pity that the manel has done away with the traditional preaching gown. The preaching gown may be seen as a unisex garment, but the manel is definitely not women’s attire. The assumption is that women preachers must wear this male clothing to be accepted as preachers. If God calls both men and women to preach, why can we not retain our distinctiveness, our personalities and differences without conformity to an old male norm of dress? I appeal for more flexibility with regard to dress codes and a consideration that our masculine uniforms may entrench patriarchy rather than enhance the intention of the preaching uniform to represent the authority of Christ in all places and all times.

### European Fashion and Contextualisation

It is also pertinent to ask why we have to dress in such an out-dated Eurocentric fashion. We are in Africa and not in England, as John Wesley was. How can we contextualise in terms of dress for men and women preachers? It is generally assumed that the ordained person, irrespective of gender, will wear a black clerical shirt with a collar on formal occasions. Women are required to wear this with a black skirt. In many communities it is frowned upon if the woman substitutes this with trousers, which many modern women may choose to wear instead of skirts or dresses. Women should be allowed to wear smart skirts, dresses or trousers with their clerical collars, according to personal preference. Sentiments against the wearing of trousers are often based on an interpretation of certain Scriptures that label these as male attire. This is clearly not so in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore we note that black is a colour that absorbs the heat and may not be the most suitable in an African context. Perhaps an alternative lighter colour could be sought. If the norm of black clerical attire is to be upheld, it should be for formal occasions rather than the expectation for every day. There should also be flexibility about the style of the formal dress as there ought to be room for choice regarding styles to accommodate different body shapes and sizes rather than having a certain pattern prescribed. .

The point about which I continue to have the most concern in terms of clerical and preaching dress is that we appear to be following outdated, European male norms rather than exercising creativity to consider our African context and come up with an alternative. While we need to question our traditional formal clerical uniform as a whole, many women are still inclined to wear this for funerals and solemn assemblies as a symbol of respect. On other occasions, however, both men and women clergy are showing a preference for coloured and patterned fabrics with different styles for their clerical shirts, when they retain the clerical collar. Many women enjoy using soft, feminine materials and styles for their shirts and some have clerical dresses made with inserts for their collars. The symbol of the clerical collar thus remains important for many, particularly when visiting hospitals and formal functions, as a form of identification of the calling. Sometimes a collar is not even noticed when a woman wears it, as society is still conditioned to expect ministers to be male. Perhaps this makes it even more important for women to wear the collar in public ministry settings and so to alert the general public to the inclusion of women in the ministry. A sister on duty in a hospital ward noticed a woman minister with a collar and called out her surprise and delight. Somehow the news is still not out that women are able and called to do this task.

### Uniforms and Status

The issue of uniforms runs very deep in the veins of many Methodists. We are by no means immune from the danger of elevating people in uniform. In working with many local preachers, I am convinced that the motive of status is still of major concern. The uniform becomes a sign of being elevated above the congregation rather than any indication of Wesleyan simplicity. The intention of gowns was once a symbol of authority that masked individuality, but in our twenty-first context it has come to be used to draw attention to the person. No matter if a gown or other clerical attire is worn, the point of preaching is to draw attention to God and not to the individual. Wesley chose plainness rather than the ostentation of the priestly tradition of the Anglican Church. Men and women should equally guard against ostentation in their dress in the pulpit and in all their ministerial duties. I conclude that it is by no means clear that specific clerical wear remains helpful in this day and age for either men or women. Do we who preach the gospel not have to stand out because of our holiness and evident walk with God rather than our distinctive dress? Do we pay too much attention to the outward appearance? My appeal is for flexibility, respect for one another and grace.

### Recommendation

It is thus my recommendation that our dress codes should reflect:

- Flexibility
- Respect for one another
- Grace