

# Why Do We Do That?

*This is the first in a series of articles Lutheran customs and practices.*

## Vestments

A preschool student once asked, when seeing Pastor Becker on the way to chapel, “Why are you wearing those God clothes?” Those “God clothes” are called vestments, and the basic answer to the question is: tradition.

A pastor’s vestments are like a uniform that he wears when he is performing his duties. Certain professions, such as airline pilots, police, the military, etc., wear uniforms partly to make them instantly recognized as those who have a particular role, position or authority. They also indicate that these people’s actions, as well as their appearance, are to be uniform, that is, following certain common standards, rather than just determined by their own preference or whim.

Many uniforms have elements that are unique because they are traditional. That is, they may have been a common item of clothing at one time but, as styles changed, what was worn by those in this uniform did not change. The hats of policemen and highway patrol troopers, for example, are similar to hats commonly worn by many at one time.

Part of a pastor’s “uniform” is the shirt with a “backward collar”, that is a clerical collar. This type of collar evolved from

those commonly worn by men in the 1700s. After it was a traditional collar worn only by clergy, the clerical collar itself evolved into various types. Many now only have a piece of plastic at the front. Some pastors wear a clerical shirt whenever on duty, some only when leading worship, a few own no other shirts, and some don’t wear such shirts at all!

The gowns worn by pastors for worship originate with the robes worn by various professions before modern pants developed. Robes worn by judges and academic gowns of professors, seen now only at graduation ceremonies, have the same roots. This was everyday clothing for pastors, teachers and others at one time. The black gown worn by pastors today is called a cassock.

For worship, pastors would put on a clean white gown over their other clothing. In colder climates, such as Germany, this would be large and loose fitting to go over heavy, warm clothes. The loose fitting white gown worn over a cassock is called a surplice. In warmer climates, a more fitted robe was worn. The less flowing white gown worn by pastors is called an alb (from the Latin word for “white”). It is often worn with a rope belt called a cincture. At one time it was more common for Lutheran pastors to wear a cassock and surplice. In more recent years, the alb has become more common.

Over time, a symbolic significance has been attached to the traditional vestments. The black clothing has been seen as a symbol of human

sinfulness, which is covered by the righteousness of Christ, symbolized by the white gown worn over the top.

Pastor Becker has both types of vestments, gifts from his grandfather. He wears the cooler alb from Easter Sunday until the last Sunday of the Church year. He wears the cassock and surplice from the First Sunday of Advent through Lent (both penitential seasons), wearing only the black cassock on Good Friday. Beside the relative warmth of the two types of gown, another practical reason for wearing each half the year is so that they do not wear out as quickly.

During worship, pastors wear a colored “stole”, matching the color of the altar paraments, according to the season of the church year. This stole, placed on a pastor at his ordination, is a symbolic yoke – like that worn by oxen or other draft animals – to indicate that he carries the responsibility for the spiritual care of the congregation.

Some other clergy, beside Lutherans, also wear these or similar vestments, while the clergy of some denominations do not. The use of traditional vestments by Lutheran pastors helps to draw attention to their unique role in a service of worship rather than drawing attention to themselves as individuals. His expensive or cheap suit, flashy tie, etc., are covered over by the symbols of his office.

*Do you have an idea for a Lutheran practice you would like explained? Suggest it to Pastor Becker.*