

Author: Paul F. Bosch [ [pbosch@golden.net](mailto:pbosch@golden.net) ]  
Series: Worship Workbench  
Issue: Essay 140 + July, 2009



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## ABOUT ALBS AN OPEN LETTER TO MY NEPHEW

Because I'm a graduate of your Seminary (Class of 1956) and simply because of my grey hairs, I hope you'll hear me out.

I'm writing because I've heard of the current controversy at your school over the albs used at worship: They apparently remind some of Ku Klux Klan outfits. I'm pleading that you keep them as is, and simply instruct Seminarians and others in their history and beauty.

Your Seminary's albs are hands down the most beautiful albs I've ever seen. I own two like them. To change them would be a terrible step in the wrong direction, liturgically.

I grew up in a Lutheran Pastor's household where Dad — your grandfather — wore a black robe with stole in the early days of his ministry. Under the influence of the liturgical tastes of his day, he changed, before he died in 1979, to the use of (black) cassock and (white) surplice, with stole in the colour of the season.

My Dad never lived long enough to make the change to (white) alb with (coloured) stole, and (coloured) chasuble for Communion. He might have resisted that change. "Too much harness and not enough horse", to quote an old Seminary professor of mine.

"Liturgical taste" is part of what we're talking about here, admittedly. Such matters (as what leaders wear in worship) are surely *adiaphora*: neither commanded nor prohibited by the Gospel, but simply neutral.

But as I have been at pains to point out in these postings, *nothing* is ever "simply *adiaphora*". Everything human beings do and make and wear has import. Everything we do and make and wear imparts a message. These things — even *adiaphora* — always "speak". They tell us something, about the doer or maker or wearer.

The white alb is the garment of baptism. And it belongs not just to clergy but to every layperson as well. Anyone serving up-front in Christian worship has the right to wear an alb by virtue of baptism. In ancient baptisms, you took off all your clothes — to signify your rejection of all that pertained to your previous life. You were baptized nude by total immersion. And you rose out of the waters to be clothed in a white garment signifying “putting on the righteousness of Christ”. Those are potent, worthy symbols I’d like to retain. Like to return to, where they’ve been lost.

Why white? Perhaps because — I’m speculating — it’s the colour of most garments to this day in the Middle East, as daily TV news footage will attest. (Unlike, say, sub-Saharan Africa, where you can see a riot of colours on almost any evening newscast.) Moreover, white is neutral, allowing the Church’s splendid Church Year colour code to develop. And you can tell when a white garment needs laundering!

Further, the alb enjoys wide ecumenical acceptance. A Presbyterian pastor friend wears one; a Mennonite pastor friend wears one.

A (white) alb — Always white: “Alb” means “white” — is preferable to a black robe not because it’s white, but because it’s an ecclesiastical garment and not an academic garment. Both academic and ecclesiastical garments have common roots, but I’m offended — as an ex-academic myself — when I see pastors without a doctor’s degree wearing a doctor’s academic robe. (Academic garments are even more vocation-specific than ecclesiastical garments!)

Hey, an auto mechanic’s one-piece blue jump suit is as surely vocational as an alb. A blue jump suit could be thought of as the “vestment” of an auto mechanic. In Canada, a judge will wear an 18<sup>th</sup> Century wig at the bench! Some lawyers here wear wigs as well. Medical personnel and electronic technicians world-wide wear white lab coats.

Bottom line: Church people do not have to apologize for wearing vestments. Almost every vocation has a version of them.

So the only question is not, shall I wear vestments? But what vestments shall I wear? (Same with music and architecture and all the arts. It’s not “Whether?” But “Which?” You cannot NOT use the arts in worship. As in life...)

If you’re going to use an historic liturgy — And Lutherans always have; It’s one of our treasures — then there’s no persuasive reason not to use also the historic communion vestments: White alb (sign of your baptism) under a stole in the colour of the Day (sign of your ordination to minister the Word) under a chasuble in the colour of the Day (sign of your ordination to preside at Communion).

Those seasonal colours of the Church Year are a wonderful teaching tool, too. Those colours are not just there “for pretty”. They speak a message, to those initiated. That means as pastor you’ve got to initiate: You’ve got to educate and keep educating. Even apparently Seminarians!

And they belong to our history. Alb-stole-chasuble are ancient historic ecclesiastical vestments. Martin Luther knew them. So did Francis of Assisi. So did Augustine. Says a friend: "When I put on these vestments, I am two thousand years old!"

That's not to be sneezed at. Vestments are part of the transcultural heritage of the Christian faith.

The Hawaiian sport shirt with shorts and sneakers you'll sometimes see on "mega-church" worship leaders doesn't teach the same lesson. (They're "vestments" too, you can be sure!) Although even these may be appropriate at, say, a campfire communion. Context is important, too.

Now, if you're going to wear a (white) alb, what should it look like? I'd take my cue here from theatre. At the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, near where I live, ecclesiastical garments on stage are always 1) exceedingly full, NOT tailored or form-fitting, with exceedingly wide sleeves, 2) ankle-length or shoe-top length, all but sweeping the floor (no knee-length "high waters"), 3) with hood or cowl at the neckline, 4) in fabrics appropriate to the office or Day or Season, and finally 5) without cincture.

Principle 1) above ensures an attractive profile of vertical columns of folds, like classical statuary — flattering to any body type. A cincture (5 above) has been interpreted as a symbol for celibacy, a problematic message today. Further, it only cuts an unbecoming horizontal through those handsome verticals. But worse yet, a belt or cincture inevitably calls attention to your looming buns or your bulging beer belly. Not an edifying sight for worshippers.

True, the ample fulness *and* the long length *and* the wide sleeves take some getting used to. But hey, you're a professional, or training to be one. It's simply part of the burden of your worship leadership. Get used to wearing an alb. It's part of your work clothes.

Principle 3) above ensures that your head and face are framed attractively. A Medieval vestment called an *amice* served the same function visually. A collarless alb looks incomplete, unfinished. Ditto an alb tailored with a "step" collar, like a cassock. Highly unattractive. The hood is never raised, so perhaps a cowl is better than a hood. One of my albs has a cowl, the other a hood, never raised, but simply — and neatly — folded back over stole and chasuble, like a cowl. If my memory serves, your Seminary's albs have cowls, not hoods. If I'm wrong, just don't raise the hood. Ever. Except temporarily, while you're putting on your stole or chasuble.

Principle 4) above ensures that the garment "speaks" its distinctive message without added embellishments. Inserts of lace on albs, galloons or orphreys front or back or both, appliqued symbols on stoles or chasubles — none of these is necessary and most are merely tacky. Remember: The vestment itself is a symbol. It is simply redundant to put a symbol on a symbol. If the fabric it's made of is worthy and carefully selected, then it "speaks" of the meanings of its Day or Season or office without other symbols

superimposed. The vestment itself *is* the symbol. It needs no other symbols applied to make it “speak” more clearly. And no applied symbol will be able to rescue a vestment constructed of an unworthy fabric.

The fabric of an alb should be like those at your Seminary. They should be white or off-white, and be lightweight, easy to launder, and require no ironing. Probably of blended fibres. (I carry my alb — all my vestments! — balled up rather carelessly in one of those reusable plastic grocery bags! Wrinkles hang out within minutes.) One hundred percent polyester or nylon present problems: They often feel like ladies’ underwear, and do not allow you to sweat. After several wearings, you “smell like New Jersey,” to paraphrase TV’s immortal Rosanne Rosannadanna.

Because it’s white, the texture of an alb is its splendour, and “speaks” its most eloquent message. The texture should, if at all possible, recall antiquity and contemporaneity simultaneously: A peasant-like “hand” or texture with a subtle “slub” is ideal, but hard to find. My wife often remarked that finding an ideal fabric for an alb was exceedingly difficult.

Finally and importantly: All worship leaders, before every occasion of public worship, should make a practice of “preening” each other before they leave the vestry. (“Preen” is my word, taken from the instincts of birds and monkeys who pick fleas and twigs from each other.) You yourself sometimes can’t tell whether your stole is hanging straight, or your hood or cowl or chasuble are crooked. Even a full length mirror — Every vestry needs one! — can sometimes betray you. Only another person can see your crazy imperfections. And those imperfections — a stole hanging too far down on one side, for example — can often ruin the whole worship experience for even a casual observer. See [Essay 21](#) in this series.

My wife, your Aunt Kathy, worked wonders with fabric and needle and thread. She made vestments for half the clergy of our local Synod, it sometimes seems. To great acclaim; her choice of fabrics was the crucial matter, but her handwork also was exceptional. At her funeral, her fans and friends hung the church with some of her chasubles and albs. It was a glorious tribute to a remarkable woman.

I’m willing to grant the possibility that future generations, in a radically egalitarian and in a radically diminished ecclesial culture, will make choices different from those we make today. See [Essay 113](#). Until then, I vote for the above vestments and the above principles.

In conclusion, I beg you: Do what you can to retain your Seminary’s vestments, including those splendid albs. Don’t abandon them or modify them. If you do, you will be liable to the judgments of history: “These people did not know what a treasure they possessed.”

