



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What are vestments and paraments and Why are they used?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Background

Vestments are the distinctive clothing worn by those who lead worship. They are worn by pastors, lay assisting ministers, acolytes, communion ministers, choirs and cantors.

Vestments are more related to uniforms than costumes; they communicate the role of the leader. They also say that an individual is functioning in a particular relationship to a community of believers and connected to a recognizable, historic pattern of leadership. The distinctive clothing worn by police officers, judges, and nurses communicates their role; vestments function in a similar way. This differs from wearing a costume and pretending to be something or someone else. Using vestments in idiosyncratic ways confuses and undermines identification with a role, just as dressing a judge as a police officer only confuses and makes the uniform a pretense. Vestments, like uniforms, ought to communicate clearly and honestly.

Worship leaders wear vestments on behalf of the assembly. Wearing white garments such as the alb (see below) reminds us of the white garment presented or worn at baptism. The colors of vestments, especially those worn by the pastor or displayed as paraments, communicate the liturgical season (see also, [“What is the meaning and use of liturgical colors?”](#)).

The use of vestments in Lutheran churches is not dictated by any law and will vary according to local customs and practice. What is most important is that congregations take the time to understand that what we wear will carry meaning. When used clearly and with understanding, vestments (with other visual arts and symbols) “embody and support the proclamation of the word of God” (*Principles for Worship*, Principle S-16).

The use of vestments varies ecumenically. The Episcopal Church, one of our full communion partners (see also, [“What does Full Communion mean for Lutheran worship?”](#)) ordains deacons. In this tradition, a special stole is worn to mark their

ordained ministry. Diaconal ministers, a lay roster of the ELCA, do not wear stoles, but may wear a vestment called a dalmatic (See *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook* in Resources).

Like other clothing, the exact design of vesture in the church varies over time according to artistic development. Congregations are using rediscovered traditional and exciting contemporary design as they explore ways to use vesture in worship. Commercial vestment makers are not the only source for vesture. Artists and designers also work in this area. Many congregations seek out those talented in working with cloth to design and make vestments that reflect the local culture and artistic tastes.

The wearing of vestments can present challenges. Many people do not understand the baptismal connection of the alb. In all situations regarding vestments, congregations are encouraged to fully explain and understand why certain vestments are used.

In certain contexts, practical concerns can affect the wearing of vestments, especially by choirs. In non-air conditioned worship spaces, they can simply be too warm in the summer months.

Vestments in Detail

The **stole** is a long band of fabric worn by clergy as a sign of ordination since the eighth century. It is presented during the ordination rite. Stoles are worn in the color of the day, over the alb by ordained ministers. In fabric and color it usually matches the chasuble. It is a symbol of the yoke of obedience to Christ (see Matthew 11:28-30). Since the stole is a sign of ordination, care should be taken that vestments worn by others, especially choirs, should not appear to be stoles. The stole is usually not worn for Daily Prayer.



The **chasuble** is the principal vestment of the presiding minister at the Eucharist. It is a very full vestment, in the appointed color of the church year, and is worn like a poncho over the alb and stole. It is a sign of the abundance of the eucharistic feast. It has been used as the distinctive eucharistic vestment since the eleventh century.

The **cassock** is a black ankle-length garment with long narrow sleeves, usually buttoned in front from neck to ankle. It is not really a vestment, but a garment often worn under the alb or other vestments. (The cassock was often lined with fur in northern European countries in winter, when churches had no heat.) For clergy, the cassock is black; in some traditions, bishops wear purple or red.



The **surplice** is a full-sleeved white vestment worn over the cassock for Morning and Evening Prayer and Compline (Prayer at the Close of the Day). It originated in the eleventh century as a monastic choir vestment. Originally ankle-length, the surplice has gradually become somewhat shorter (knee-length). A derivative vestment is the cotta, a white waist-length version of the surplice. The cotta sometimes is worn over the cassock by acolytes and choristers.

Finally, the **cope** is an ornate processional cloak or cape. It is open in the front, fastened near the neck with an ornamental clasp known as the morse. Unlike other vestments, most of which derived from forms of secular clothing, the cope originated out of a need for a garment that could be worn when a chasuble would be inappropriate (for example, the Daily Prayer rites, or festive processions). It is worn in the color of the day.



The vestments of lay assisting ministers depend on those of the presider. If the presider wears alb, stole, and chasuble, the assisting ministers also wear albs. If the presider wears cassock and surplice, so do the assisting ministers.

Other vestments are traditionally worn by bishops. All wear a pectoral cross. Optional vestments include a miter (a stiff, pointed hat) and a crozier (staff).

Some congregations have their assisting ministers wear dalmatics or tunics. (See *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook*, p. 32 for descriptions and illustrations.) This vestment is also worn by diaconal ministers, a lay rostered ministry in the ELCA.

Choir vestments

Choirs and other musical leaders may also wear vestments. Like pastors and lay ministers, choirs and musicians serve as worship leaders. For this reason, their vestments best resemble those of other lay ministers rather than resembling academic gowns. Such gowns may be colorful, but their use separates the choir from the other worship leaders. To accentuate the common ministry of the choir with other ministers, wearing albs is recommended. The cassock and cotta are still worn by choirs in many settings. (see above for descriptions).

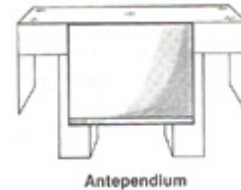
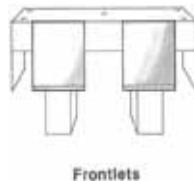
Choirs also vest to accentuate the unity of the group. By wearing a common garment, attention is not drawn to the clothes or styles of individual members.

Children's choirs can wear the same vestments as adult choirs, differing only in size. This demonstrates that choirs of all ages serve as worship leaders and that their role in worship is as important as the adult participants.

Paraments

Paraments are the hangings on the altar and pulpit, and on the lectern if there is one.

Paraments are a counterpart of vestments, but paraments "clothe" or "vest" the central furnishings in the chancel. There are usually paraments on the altar (the major type is called a Laudean frontal, while the lesser types are called superfrontals or frontlets. A parament also usually adorns the pulpit or ambo (main reading desk). Sometimes a parament is hung from the lectern, if there is one. Paraments as well as vestments are in the color of the day.



On Good Friday – the chancel having been stripped of all adornments after the Maundy Thursday liturgy – paraments are not used. Presiding and assisting ministers may wear only simple black cassocks or an alb with no stoles or other vestments.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)


- 🔗 What is the meaning and use of liturgical colors?
- 🔗 What does Full Communion mean for Lutheran worship?

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)



- 📖 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📖 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. See "Clothing for the Liturgy," pp. 91-99.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne; Julie O'Brien; Melinda Quivik and Martin Seltz, eds., *Leading Worship Matters: A Sourcebook for Preparing Worship Leaders.* Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Stauffer, S. Anita. *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.

 Van Loon, Ralph and S. Anita Stauffer. *Worship Wordbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

Other Resources

-  [Vestments and paraments have a long tradition in Christian churches](#). For history, see the entry for "Vestments" in the recently released *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul Bradshaw. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002. London: SCM, 2002. pp. 464-471).
-  Adams, William Seth. [Shaped by Images](#). New York: Church Publishing, 2000.

Examples of Websites for Vestments and Paraments

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|  CM Almy | http://www.almy.com/ |
|  The Holy Rood Guild | http://www.holyroodguild.com/ |
|  Meyer Vogelpohl | http://www.mvchurchgoods.com/ |
|  Slabbink | http://www.slabbink.be/en-US/homepage/index.html |

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