

THE DRESS OF WOMEN MINISTERS

Now that the Church of Scotland has admitted women to the ministry it is perhaps not an irrelevant question to consider how they should be dressed.

The first woman theologian to whom I put the question dismissed it as trivial, but then she was not working in a parish and so perhaps the question remained academic.

My first reaction would be to say that women ministers should dress just as men do – ‘dog-collar’ and all, but here again there is no unanimity. Some years ago our President was appealing in *Manse Mail* for the constant use of the clerical collar when on duty and perhaps also off duty, but on the other hand a well-known Scottish woman minister said to me, ‘Thank goodness that as a woman I don’t need to pretend to be anything other than a human being’.

The question seems to me to be a real one which various women members of the profession have solved in their own way – some more happily than others. It also raises the question of how ministers of any kind should dress. I’ve always said I dressed for the job I was doing, but there again I’ve been criticized for wearing a clerical collar with a kilt, but have been commended by the late Dr. Lamont of Blair Atholl for wearing such a combination to attend the General Assembly.

If the Society believes that things should be done ‘decently and in order’ what criteria are to be applied here? On the next few pages there appear a number of comments on this question and the Editor will be happy to consider any others which may be forthcoming from members of the Society or from readers.

(EDITOR)

* * *

It must be accepted from the beginning that in this sphere one cannot please everybody. There is no right answer to what one wears to church but there are plenty of people who are prepared to criticize dress in any shape or form; therefore what we are seeking is the least worst solution to a genuine problem.

Times have changed. Men wear their hair much longer than they did a generation ago; beards have reappeared on faces and clothes are much trendier than ever before. Women likewise are different. In many congregations hats are in the minority at Sunday Services while trouser suits – smart and comfortable – are on the increase. Colours are brighter; indeed, it is said that one of the brightest and

most colourful programmes on television is 'Songs of Praise' and the sincerity of worship has not suffered one whit from the change.

How does all this affect the topic under discussion? First of all the position of women ministers. There is much talk of equal pay for work of equal value, of the women's lib movement, of equal rights, and if this principle is to be established anywhere, then surely the church is the place where there should be least opposition since everyone is the same in the eyes of God.

Should there be a uniform for women ministers? This is really a non-question for the answer is so obviously 'yes' if the case for male uniform is sound, and there is no suggestion that men ministers should appear in sports clothes ready to nip off to the golf course between services. And further, if equality is to mean anything then the dress for women should be as for men with dog collar and long black cassock, and the whole completed with scarf and gown and hood. In every way the same as for the male counterpart. And last of all, no hat.

The problem on days other than Sundays, or when not officiating at services, is perhaps more difficult; although at baptisms, or funerals, or wedding services, then dog collar with suitable blouse (possibly white) and skirt, would seem to be the appropriate garb.

But at social functions and on informal occasions, including sick visiting, the lady minister should dress appropriately as an ordinary member of the fair sex. Much depends on the age, build and personality of the individual, to say nothing of the fashion house trends, but there certainly should be scope for originality.

And a thought for Kirk Treasurers: it makes a great deal of sense for a clothing allowance to be included in the list of legitimate expenses to say nothing of a hairdressing allowance; if we are to have women ministers we certainly want them to look their best at all times.

And what of the woman Elder? It is the case that at communion services men tend to dress sombrely either in morning suits or in dark clothing. Some, wrongly, wear black ties seemingly under the impression that the occasion is a sad one.

But with the exception of ties, the same dress is worn at moments of celebration, at investiture ceremonies, at weddings, and so the principle might be that women should dress as for a celebration at communion services. It follows then that generally a hat ought to be worn but not a dark, dowdy, so-called 'suitable' model, but one which is bright and attractive and which would go well with an outfit appropriate to an occasion of celebration. Anyone who has seen Woman's Guild ladies 'skail' from the Usher Hall at Assembly time will realize that brightness prevails. The same can be true of our Elders at the communion celebration.

At other times women office-bearers, who will come in all shapes and sizes with different attitudes and different personalities, will wear whatever suits them; and this is as it should be, for the people are more important than the trimmings.

Those who are chosen for Eldership and who express willingness to accept the vows of ordination, will all be sincere, will all believe, will all be humble and no one will want to make a spectacle of herself. Let us trust the good sense of our women office-bearers and let them each in their own way help brighten the lives of the members whom they seek to serve.

ALLAN F. BLACKLAWS, Church of Scotland Elder

* * *

A critical cartoon in an American Roman Catholic magazine mocked women seeking ordination by picturing them as coveting the chance to wear the 'fancy dress' of a bishop or cardinal. Perhaps the best response was made by a Methodist woman now preparing for ordination: Was it *women* who invented all the paraphernalia and wore it through the centuries?

Who makes an issue of the question concerning what ordained women will wear? Is it primarily people who expect them to fit the stereotype of the female who can find little better way to spend her time than in wardrobe planning? Is it those who will make an issue of anything if it will make the ordination of women seem complex and problematic and therefore to be discouraged? Women seeking ordination or already ordained on the other side of the Atlantic seem to see the question as a 'non-question' when expressed in the terms of what *women* will wear.

It is not simply the pluralism of the church scene in the United States which makes the issue dissolve. It is to some extent true that almost any practice – any form of liturgy, any mode of dress, any theological position – may well be seen in America at some time or another. Yet it is not this seemingly endless variety which causes the general question of what ordained women will wear to evaporate.

The ordained woman deciding upon either her daily dress or her clothing for services of worship, 'high' or 'low' as the order of service may be, will be asking the same questions asked by anyone who must decide about wearing collar, cassock, or chasuble: What does my chosen way of dress proclaim about my call, my understanding of the ordained ministry? Will it distinguish me from other members of the Church, and, if so, will it do so to 'the greater glory of God' or for the division of God's people? Will it be an obstacle, a distraction, or an aid in my particular ministry?

If there are practical differences in detail in the ways that women

and men express their decisions, such matters are scarcely substantially significant enough for generalization. In the liturgical churches there is not much room for problems, for the ordained woman simply wears the appropriate liturgical vestments during the worship service. When serving as a liturgist and preacher for the Lutheran Church in America during the summer, this writer faced the fact that the vestments – cassocks and albs specifically – from both Lutheran and Roman Catholic suppliers were rather too broad about the shoulders. So the vestments had to be made by hand.

The question of what women will wear has no more and no less theological, liturgical, or ecclesiastical significance than the general question of what a male ordained minister should wear. Ultimately it is a personal decision. It will be affected by the elements involved in moulding people as persons and as ministers, here specifically those such as one's tradition, lifestyle and style of ministry, the feelings of the congregation and people one serves, one's understanding of the meaning of the distinction between the clergy and the laity. The decision is not to be made solely or primarily on the basis of being male or female (nor, one might add, of being Jew or Greek, slave or free).

BEVERLY SUE OLSON, Lutheran, Research Student, New College, Edinburgh

* * *

The tradition of a minister wearing some particular badge of office – a dog-collar, and robes when conducting public worship – has presumably a two-fold purpose; to show that he is available to everybody for discussion or advice; and to reflect the authority by which he preaches – the Word of God, not his own word, the minister being the vehicle by which God's Word reaches a congregation gathered for worship.

The question as to what a woman minister should wear arises from the fact that, generally speaking, a plain dark suit is not unusual for any man to wear; a dog-collar is his badge, which is worn with ordinary everyday clothes. In a woman's case, however, ordinary clothes are not necessarily as plain as those of a man; and a dog-collar, I take it, is out of the question! Perhaps the best garb for a woman minister in her ordinary everyday parish work, is some relatively unostentatious dress, plus a small lapel brooch, indicating that she is an ordained minister. It is fairly important I think that she should not detract attention from her ministry by her own appearance; and therefore the adoption of some uniform, determined by herself, would save continuous decisions about suitable dress.

As far as preaching goes, and conducting of worship in church, I

think it is helpful if the leader is gowned, again with the purpose of deflecting attention from the person, to what he is saying. It is a great danger to ministers that their own person may get in the way of their proclamation, with the result that a congregation reacts to the minister himself (or herself) instead of what is being said. Probably the best thing for a woman minister to wear in the pulpit is her usual working dress and brooch plus an ordinary academic gown. The traditional heavy robes of the C. of S. ministers, one feels instinctively, are not really suitable for women to wear

So I suggest that, generally, a woman minister wear a fairly plain outfit, with some badge or brooch indicating her office, and that this should become a regular uniform, recognizable by parishioners, to make it easier for them to regard her as a minister. And in addition, a gown might be worn for preaching and conducting worship.

JEAN KELTIE, Student of Theology, New College, Edinburgh