

The Diocese of Gloucester

The Use of Robes and Vestments

1. This paper sets out to give guidance on the use of robes and vestments in the leadership of worship. In brief the position is this:
 - The Anglican norm remains the wearing of robes to lead statutory services.
 - There are occasions when this can be set aside in furtherance of the church's mission in the cultural context in which it is set.
 - A decision to do so should be made jointly by the minister and the PCC.
 - A minister and a PCC will have my goodwill where a decision has been made with due care and they can expect me to defend them if I receive complaints.

Paragraphs 2-10 set out the position and consider the arguments in more detail.

2. The vesture of ministers in the Church of England is regulated by Canon B 8. Canon 8.1 declares that no particular doctrinal position is to be assumed by the use of particular forms of vesture. Canon B 8.2 requires the good will of the PCC before a minister changes the custom of the parish in this regard. In terms of what may be worn, the canons require the presiding minister to wear a surplice or alb with scarf or stole at Holy Communion and the Occasional Offices (B 8.3 & B 8.5) and "normally" to do so at Morning and Evening Prayer (B 8.4). At Holy Communion other customary vestments may be worn (B 8.3).
3. This is an area where there is increasing departure from what the canons require. It is not good for the spiritual health of the Church where clergy set aside the canons without consultation and where the Bishop colludes by silence. It is better to be open and honest and to seek a way forward that respects all consciences.
4. Canon B 8 sets out the norm in the Church of England and a departure from it should not be undertaken lightly. The use of distinctive robes and vestments has a long history and the arguments for their use are still valid ones. However the canons, which in this respect have not been revised recently, do not take into account the conviction of clergy that the use of distinctive robes and vestments are a barrier in communicating the gospel afresh in the changed circumstances of the 21st century. That conviction, where it has been carefully thought through, needs to be respected, coming as it very often does from ministers in fast growing churches.
5. The most important canon in this respect is Canon B 8.2. This prevents a minister from changing the form of vesture unless "he has ascertained by consultation with the parochial church council that such changes will be acceptable". The canon is

intended to cover a change from one form of distinctive vesture to another (say from surplice and stole to alb, stole and chasuble). But, when a minister wishes to make the more radical move from the use of robes to the dispensing of them for all or particular services, consultation with the PCC is clearly desirable. As bishop I would find it difficult, on receiving a complaint, to support and uphold a priest if he/she had not obtained the goodwill of the PCC for a change of practice.

6. It is desirable when there is a discussion in a PCC about dispensing with robes that there should also be some agreement about what the ministers will wear, so that that does not become a source of division or disharmony.
7. In relation to Morning and Evening Prayer, the use of the word “normally” in Canon B 8.4 provides sufficient freedom for a minister and PCC to dispense with robes. Less formal occasions, Word Services, all age worship, Family Services do not come within the canons and are therefore a matter for local custom.
8. Canon B 8.3 is less permissive in relation to Holy Communion. The requirement of the canon is that the presiding minister (though the requirement extends to no one else) should wear robes. This should not easily be set aside, for it involves a departure from a canon law. However, where a minister and PCC have thought through the matter carefully, I am content that the requirements of the canon should be set aside in furtherance of the church’s mission in the cultural context in which it is set.
9. In relation to the Occasional Offices, where Canon B 8.5, makes the same requirement, there is a similar debate to be had. But additionally here the views of those for whom the service is being celebrated should be taken into account. Whatever the overall policy agreed in the PCC, the minister should only dispense with robes at a wedding with the goodwill of the couple and at a funeral with the goodwill of the principal mourners.
10. In a parish where it is decided to dispense with the use of robes, it is important to protect the conscience of members of staff who nevertheless wish to stay within the terms of the canons. A priest, deacon or reader who wishes to robe must not be forbidden to do so, though it may ease their conscience to know that the canons only require the presiding minister on any occasion to robe. But a minister coming into a parish where a decision to dispense with robes has already been passed must, of course, respect the practice already established.
11. On occasions when clergy gather together, whether diocesan or deanery occasions, it is important that their collegiality be expressed by a common approach. What this should be on any occasion should be clearly signalled by the Bishop, Archdeacon or Area Dean. I expect clergy to robe at Ordinations, Institutions and Licensings.

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