VESTMENTS

**Vestment** is the term for the special clothing worn by the people who conduct a worship service. Vestments have their origin in the ordinary street clothes of the first century, but have more or less remained the same as clothing fashions have changed. (Most Bible translations are not consistent with the names of articles of clothing, and in some translations, people go around wearing ‘garments.’ The original text is consistent and more specific.)

Today, vestments are designed to be worn over street clothes and serve a number of practical purposes: they conceal the distractions of fashionable street clothing, they remove any consideration of what constitutes appropriate attire, and they remind the congregation that the ministers are not acting on their own, but performing in their official capacities. Vestments are in almost universal use, although in some churches only the choir wears vestments. Common vestments include **albs** (pronounced al-bis), **chasubles**, and **surplices**. People commonly think that **cassocks** are vestments, but they are really just old-fashioned street clothes that are worn under vestments.

**Clerical** is the term to describe the distinctive street clothing that clergy wear, such as black shirts with white collars. The shirt can be any color, but the public often does not perceive it as a clergy shirt unless it is black. There are two kinds, **neckband shirts** and **tab-collar shirts**. . . . The term ‘clericals’ refers to the clothing and accessories that clergy wear as street clothes, such as a **tab-collar shirt**, which make it evident that they are clergy. The difference between clericals and vestments is that clericals are street clothes, while vestments are only worn during worship.


**VESTMENTS & CLERICALS USED AT CHRIST UMC**

At Christ United Methodist Church, the pastor most often wears an alb with a rope cincture and a stole symbolizing his ordination as an elder in the United Methodist Church. Acolytes were cossaks and cottas and the choir members wear choir robes. The pastor also wear a neckband clergy shirt on Sundays and while visiting hospitals or leading in other services of worship.

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**An alb**, called a sticharion in Orthodox churches, is a plain, lightweight, ankle-length tunic with long sleeves. It is generally worn with a **rope cincture** around the waist. The word alb is short for the Latin phrase tunica alba, which means white tunic; accordingly, albs are usually made of white or undyed fabric.

In the first century, the tunic was the first article of clothing that you put on in the morning. Working-class people wore knee-length Tunics, while older people and people with less active occupations wore ankle-length tunics. It was possible to wear more than one tunic at a time for warmth, but it was considered gauche to wear a tunic without a cincture.

The tunic was originally sleeveless. Greeks and Romans thought sleeves were barbaric because barbarians wore them. (The barbarians lived in colder climates.) Tunics did not acquire sleeves until the third century, when a Roman Emperor came back from a military campaign wearing a tunic with sleeves—much to the
horror of the fashion mavens of the day. A modern alb has sleeves because we need to cover street clothing that has sleeves.

In the first century, most people wore a himation over their tunics. The himation was a rectangular garment that was wrapped around the upper body. The designs on the himation, as well as its color and quality, varied depending on the wearer’s sex, occupation, and social status. Because of the relatively precarious way it was worn and the way it hindered movement, people had to remove it when they were engaged in certain physical activities. For example, when blind Bartimaeus ran to Jesus in Mark 10:46-52, he threw off his himation. Matthew 9:20-22 tells about a woman who was healed when she touched the hem of Jesus’ himation. In Revelation 3:5, 3:18, and 4:4 people are given white himatia. Perhaps the writer of Revelation wanted us to think of people who had received a white tunic at their baptism now receiving an elegant and triumphant white himation to wear over it. The himation never became a church vestment, probably because as servants, the clergy would have to remove it anyway.

Scripture tells us that Jesus wore a himation over a tunic (‘tunic’ is χιτών in Greek) to the crucifixion. The soldiers tore the himation in four pieces, but because the tunic was woven in one piece, they cast lots for it. Jesus’ tunic would have been sleeveless and ankle-length—it was the same kind of tunic that the high priest wore when he entered into the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of the people. Ancient writings from that period refer to seamless tunics, but the technology for weaving them that way was lost in the fall of the Roman Empire.

In the first four centuries of the Church, people were baptized in the nude. For propriety, they were baptized in three groups: men, women, and children; and female deacons baptized the women. When they emerged from the water, they were immediately clothed in a white tunic (a tunica alba, or alb). For this reason, the alb is a reminder of baptism and a symbol of the resurrection on the Last Day.

Anyone who has a leadership role in worship can wear an alb and cincture, whether they are clergy or lay people. Only clergy wear a stole over the alb. Albs are increasing in popularity not only because they are ecumenical, but also because congregations are increasingly eager to conform to the practices of the ancient Church. In addition, a person wearing an alb is dressed like Jesus.

A cincture, called a poias in Orthodox churches, is anything worn around the waist to gather or hold up clothing. Vestments often include cinctures made of cloth or rope. When a cincture is made of leather or plastic, or if it is used with street clothing, it is called a belt.

Robes – Many people use the term robe as a synonym for vestment, but in actual fact, a robe is not a vestment at all. It is an ankle-length gown with long sleeves, designed to be worn without a cincture. There are four types of robes, all of which are modern forms of the academic robes that professors used to wear while on the job in medieval universities. The four types are choir robes, clergy robes, academic gowns, and judicial robes. Only the first three types are worn in church. All types of robes are designed to be worn over street clothing. The only vestment that can be worn over a robe is a stole.

Choir robes come in a large variety of styles and colors. They give the choir a unified appearance. (However, choirs can wear cassocks and surplices instead of robes.)

Academic gowns come in three forms corresponding to bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. The doctoral robe sometimes appears in church. It has puffy sleeves with three stripes on the forearm, indicating that the wearer possesses a doctoral degree. When they are used in church, academic gowns are most often worn without the square cap or the long, decorative hood down the back that normally
complete the outfit. If there is a hood, the colors indicate the wearer’s field of study and alma mater. (You
can find out the color code for the fields of study in the United States.)

Clergy robes mark clergy who do not have a doctorate degree or who do not choose to wear their doctoral
robes. Even though most clergy have a masters degree, clergy robes are a modified form of the
baccalaureate robe, probably because contemporary masters robes have an odd appearance. Clergy
robes are nearly identical to judicial robes, except that clergy robes often have a sort of built-in stole; a
wide stripe running down both sides of the zipper in the front, often with decorated with Christian
symbols.

Unlike vestments, robes are not worn by lay leaders. The original purpose of the robe was to indicate that
the wearer had the authority of academic credentials. John Calvin started the tradition of wearing
academic robes in church. He was not able to wear vestments because he was not ordained clergy, but
he did have an academic law degree. For that reason, clergy robes are most common in churches that are
in the Reformed tradition, such as Presbyterian churches, and in other groups with Calvinist roots, such
as Baptists. Choir robes are nearly universal.

People in robes are dressed like Calvin. People in albs are dressed like Jesus.

Stoles – A stole, called a epitrachilion in Orthodox churches, is a long, narrow rectangular garment that
is worn around the neck so that it hangs down in front of the wearer’s legs, ending below the knees. The
stole merges the functions of two different things. First, ancient government officials wore a stole, just as
today a policeman wears a badge. Second, slaves used used to wear work cloth around their necks, for
polishing things, and for wiping sweat from their faces. In the church, the stole functions as a badge of
office to mark the wearer as ordained clergy. It can also function as a cloth that the celebrant uses to clean
the Communionware as part of the service. For those reasons, the stole became a Eucharistic garment.

Modern stoles are usually the appropriate color for the season. Only ordained clergy wear a stole. A
deacon can also wear a stole, but it is customary for a deacon to wear it over the left shoulder, tied at the
waist on the right side, so that the stole hangs diagonally across the chest. A stole can be worn over a
robe, an alb, or a cassock.

If an ordained minister combines a cassock, surplice, and stole, the cassock goes on first, then the
surplice, then the stole on top.

If an ordained minister combines an alb, stole, and chasuble, the alb goes on first, then the stole, then the
chasuble on top. (There are stoles that are designed to be worn over chasubles, but that is not common.)

Cassock – is a plain, lightweight, ankle-length garment with long sleeves, but no hood. The cassock is a
clerical, not a vestment. It serves as an undergarment for vestments, namely the surplice (a type of alb)
and the stole.

If the cassock has buttons down the center of the front, from the neck to the ankles, it is called a Roman
cassock. If it is double-breasted, it is called an Anglican cassock.

Cassocks are worn by both clergy and lay worship leaders, with or without a surplice. Only ordained clergy
wear a stole over the surplice.

Cassocks are most common in Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox churches. The cassock-and-
surplice combination is very common in Anglican churches. Some choirs wear cassocks with surplices
instead of robes.
**Surplice** – is a very lightweight blouse-like garment with sleeves. It is almost invariably white and it often has lace trim. A surplice is only worn over a cassock, never by itself, and never over an alb or an academic gown. The surplice is actually a type of alb that is designed to be worn over a cassock. The cassock and surplice combination is very common in Anglican churches, where it is worn by both clergy and lay worship leaders.

**Cotta** - A cotta is a type of surplice.

**Clergy Shirt** – is a clerical, not a vestment. There are two types: neckband shirts and tab-collar shirts. Though many people associate clergy shirts with the Roman Catholic Church, that is only because the their sheer size makes their clergy conspicuous. Clergy shirts (black shirts with white tabs or collars) are actually of Protestant origin. The Rev. Dr. Donald McLeod of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) invented the neck-band shirt style. Protestant clergy had been wearing white preaching bands for quite some time; McLeod combined them with the detachable collar that was in use at the time. The Roman Catholic Church did not adopt them as streetwear for clergy until later. They modified Rev. McLeod’s design into the tab-collar style.