

Platform decorum and dress

When an administrator telephoned to describe a congregation's warfare over their minister's platform dress, I remembered an illustration I had seen posted in scores of vestries over dozens of years. Researching the source, I found it came from this very journal.

If that depiction (reproduced below) were normative for all ministers, every clergy would be a middle-aged, white male dressed only in conservative business attire. And multiple congregations which have posted it as a model would have elevated this example to sacerdotal expectation, if not sacred mandate.



If a picture equals a thousand words, this illustration, which accompanied *Ministry's* 1942 article, states more about cultural expectations among members than about any particular viewpoint. Of course times have changed as have expectations both from society in general and the subculture of church-attending believers. Similar debates of music and worship styles typically produce more heat than light as stereotypical opinions—"everyone else should look just like me"—cause many to judge rashly and harshly anyone who differs.

Recognizing wide diversity among clergy in just my denomination and the impossibility of advocating, much less enforcing, one style as appropriate dress, note some guiding principles, hopefully "with charity to all."

Appropriate for the call. Through history, God has designated distinctive dress for spiritual leaders; sometimes, very elaborate and ornate such as bejeweled, multicolored attire for the high priest; sometimes as plain as a sim-

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ple linen tunic. A wider range of possibilities than any single culture might adopt seems acceptable to heaven, so the wider question might ought to ask: "How does my dress and decorum display the Holy Spirit's calling?"

Appropriate for the expectations. Among Adventists today, platform dress ranges from ornate pulpit robes in urban congregations to open-neck sport shirts in California. Sweaters in Scandinavia, barongs in the Philippines, dashikis in Africa, and Indonesian batiks may puzzle Thai worshipers with bare feet or Samoan pastors with bare legs. Women sans hats may distract worshippers in Jamaica, while members in economically challenged, arid regions might wonder why waste funds on hosiery. Without mandating any particular style as the sole option, it seems appropriate that spiritual leaders should dress and conduct themselves in a way that will not scandalize the gospel either in the eyes of the community that gathers to worship or in the wider surrounding society. Young adults and families likely tolerate more casual approaches than retirees or those who equate classic, traditional approaches with morality. It seems to me that a conservative business suit is seldom inappropriate for men or women.

Appropriate for the climate. Once, in a super-hot tropical location, I

observed that attendees might have considered the weather before garbing themselves in full suits, dress shirts, and ties. They explained their culture's expectations, as well as their own self-image for professional ministry, which required formal attire, despite the weather, despite the retreat.

Appropriate for the culture. These same pastors could envision no alternatives. Although they were generous not to scold me for dressing in a lightweight shirt, their uncomfortable laughter at "my favorite verse" for tropical clergy attire ("they shall not gird themselves with any thing that causeth sweat" Ezek. 44:18) demonstrated the seriousness of their understanding.

Appropriate for site and situation. Common sense may dictate the necessity of formal attire in a cathedral pulpit where the preacher may don a flowing pulpit robe versus a small chapel where a business suit would "feel correct" for the setting, or an outdoor event in which a sport coat or "dressy casual" dress may fit the occasion.

Appropriate for the event. And speaking of the occasion, I hope pastors today would choose dark, dignified dress for a funeral or communion even if they otherwise might meet their congregations in less formal attire. I must add, however, that one of the most solemn ordinations in which I ever participated featured each candidate wearing a new pair of rubber flip-flop shoes.

Appropriate for multigenerational, multicultural leaders. Finally, remember that your posture, decorum, and overall demeanor will speak more effectively than any outfit. Our "new" illustration (see next page) includes younger participants of both genders from a variety of backgrounds. Options may vary. Appropriate, good taste, however, must be cultivated. ■