



The implications of the usages and theology of clerical dress in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa



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Using a theological literary study, this article argues that, while there have been significant shifts in the dress code of the ordained clergy of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, these changes are often driven by uninformed personal usages rather than theological principles. This leads to confusion in the usage of liturgical wear and vestments, resulting in marked differences between orders of ordained ministry and the separation of clergy and laity. Furthermore, the inconsistent and often contradictory ecclesiology of ministerial dress leads to tensions along ecumenical lines and does not promote image of the one body of Christ. This article argues that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa needs to revisit its ecclesiology relating to the ministry of the ordained, and for their dress code in their ministry to be relevant in Southern Africa.

Contribution: This article contributes towards the ongoing discussion in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa on the usage of liturgical wear and vestments in the practice of ordained ministry. It seeks to clarify the history of the use of clerical wear and other vestments, so that a common understanding and usage can be employed that will negate ecclesiological confusion and promote ecumenical relationships.

Keywords: clerical dress; ordination; Methodism; Methodist Church of Southern Africa theology.

Introduction

In 2006, the Connexional Executive of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) sought to initiate a conversation in the church regarding four significant aspects of the life and witness of the denomination. This related specifically to the formalisation of clerical dress and worship styles in a changing environment. The request was for the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee (DEWCOM) of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (2007) to clarify the denomination's understanding on the following issues:

- What message we intend to send to our people through the increasing adoption of some of the more elaborate forms of clerical dress among our bishops and some of our clergy;
- What ecclesiology we seek to embrace and express through worship activities like the procession of officials into and out of the sanctuary;
- How we can best express our traditions and theology through our worship while still seeking to be relevant, flexible, and pro-active in our witness to young people and the un-churched;
- How we can more meaningfully incorporate all of our people, of all ages, genders, races, languages, abilities and traditions and of all our diverse worship expressions, forms and dress into the collective worship life of our church, especially at significant moments like the annual Ordination service. (pp. 50–51)

This article intends to contribute to this debate by investigating each of the four matters raised.

The message we send to our people through elaborate forms of clerical dress

The dress code of the missionaries sent to minister on the Southern African continent in the 1800s was consistent with that of the clergy persons of the Methodist denomination in England. The norm was the wearing of a black suit, black clerical shirt and clerical collar, often worn with a preaching gown. These were the influences of the Church of England, and notably John Wesley, an ordained priest of that denomination. Wesley insisted on the 'plainness' of both the preachers

and of all in the Methodist movement, declaring: 'Are you all exemplarily plain in your apparel? As plain as Quakers (so called) or Moravians?' (ed. Outler 1986:382).

Closely aligned with their mission to convert the 'heathen', was the desire to 'civilise' the indigenous people from 'barbarism and nudity' with a strong emphasis 'placed on "respectability" which prescribed dress, spiritual conduct, and severe and suspicious attitudes toward entertainments ...' (Fast 1991:80). Consequently, at the first Methodist Conference of the Southern African Connexion in 1883, the indigenous preachers are shown being formally dressed wearing collars, ties and jackets (Cragg & Millard 2013:12). Photographs from the ordination service in 1983 show that the trend set a century earlier, was continuing with all presbyters wearing dark suits and black gowns over black clerical shirts and white clerical collars. The wearing of a clerical collar was a distinctive outward expression of a person called by God to the full-time ministry.

Since then, various formal dress codes were adopted by clergy persons, with some wearing suits and collars and a gown, while others wear a cassock. Clergy were (and are), largely left to decide what form of dress code is their preference and appropriate for the occasion. Significantly, the dress code for presbyters of the Southern African Connexion is not recorded in the *Plan and Constitution of the Southern African Conference adopted by the British Conference of 1882* (Methodist Church of South Africa 1946:312–314) and has not been recorded in any editions of the *Laws and Discipline* of the Southern African Connexion (Methodist Church of South Africa 1946) or the *Methodist Book of Order* (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016a).

Regulations pertaining to dress code are, however, recorded in the constitutions of orders and organisations in the MCSA. For instance, the Constitution of the Local Preachers Association (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2018:3–13) as a means of differentiating between presbyters and local preachers by means of dress. The stipulated dress for presbyters requires that male presbyters wear 'a black clerical shirt, or a white shirt and a plain black tie' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2018:5) and female presbyters 'a black clerical shirt and a collar in place of a white shirt and a black plain tie' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2018:5). Other stipulations for laity are for instance, recorded in the Constitution of the Young Men's Guild, that provides for the distinctive dress code of a male presbyter who is a member of the Young Men's Guild, to 'wear a black shirt, instead of a white shirt and a plain black tie' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2009:96). The Constitution of the Women's Manyano includes that a woman presbyter or the wife of a presbyter, is to wear a 'plain red cape over the uniform' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2009:89) of the organisation.

Attwell, in a document presented to the Doctrine Ethics and Worship Committee, and one that is referred to by those in leadership (Mntambo 2016), describes the 'Generally

acceptable forms of clerical vestment' (Attwell 2004:1) to include the use of gowns, both preaching and academic, academic hoods, cassocks or albs, stoles that are to be worn appropriately to distinguish between ordained presbyters and deacons, and of the correct liturgical colour and the wearing of tabs or bands (Attwell 2004:1–4).

In appraising the literature, the wearing of a clerical collar is the definitive symbol of acceptance into the ordained ministry, a usage from the time of the establishment of the Methodist denomination in Southern Africa. The business of the Conference of 1972 was even delayed while the ordinands were ordered to only return to their examination before the Conference, when they were appropriately attired in a clerical collar (Dimension 1972:2). The practice of collaring a candidate on their acceptance as a probationer minister was amended by the Conference of 2009, by declaring that 'itinerant and student ministers be collared after completing their studies at SMMS and once appointed to a station' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2010:94). Specific regulations were also introduced relating to those probationers exempted from residential training (MCSA 2010:94), indicating that in 2009 the wearing of a collar by a clergy person was a significant indicator of their acceptance and role in the presbyterial ministry.

However, there have been adaptations to the usages of the black clerical shirt and collar, of which three will be noted. The introduction of the title of 'Bishop' to replace that of 'Chairman of the district' in 1989 (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 1989:382) led to the usage of bishops wearing purple clerical shirts with a clerical collar as their working dress code. This usage, approved by the bishops in a Bishop's meeting, is in terms of the Methodist understanding that '[t]he terms "Bishop" and "Presiding Bishop" refer to the title of the office and not to that of the individual' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2012:93).

In 2003, the MCSA relented to the frequent requests that deacons be allowed to wear a clerical collar, as they have been ordained to the ministry of Word and Service. At that Conference, permission was granted to those who served as deacons to wear 'the tab clerical collar bearing the insignia of the Order on it' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2003:300).

A third adaptation relates to the inherited usage, and a common practise in the latter part of the last century, that a candidate for the ministry of Word and Sacraments, on being accepted as a probationer minister, was entitled to wear a clerical collar. A special 'collaring ceremony' was frequently arranged when such a person was presented with a black clerical shirt and collar and was now called 'Reverend' or 'Moruti'. However, divisions and tensions arose between private students and Methodist seminarians at the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary (Nyobole 2018:1; Siwa 2018:1–2), resulting in the Methodist church revising their policy and usages in 2013, with the Conference resolving that seminarians were not permitted to wear a clerical collar or to use the title 'reverend'. They:

[S]hall be collared and have the title of 'Reverend' conferred at the end of the year in which they exit seminary, in their home circuits, following successful completion of their Academic and Spiritual Formation. (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2014:89)

In other words, probationer ministers are only collared after the completion of their studies at the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary and when the Conference has appointed them to serve in a station.

A significant development in the dress code of presbyters was the adaptation to and the increasing wearing of cassocks in the place of a suit and gown for formal attire. While some presbyters chose to wear a cassock, Bishop Siwa (2018:1–3), the then Presiding Bishop, identified the processes relating to the popularising of the wearing of a cassock to the influence of the Revd Andrew Losaba while he was serving as the Leader of the Mission Department. Losaba, who had returned from an extended stay in the United States of America, took to wearing a white cassock 'because he liked it' (Siwa 2018:2). His example was readily adopted by other presbyters, resulting in a usage that has become more and more prevalent among clergy persons.

A lack of policy and a theological basis for the move to a cassock as a vestment, was confusing for some. Some presbyters and some in leadership positions were wearing white cassocks, while others wore black cassocks.

Some wore gowns and others were even dressed in their academic hoods (Siwa 2018:2). Many were not happy with this developing trend, while others were concerned at the lack of a visual expression of unity among the bishops. The matter came to a head at the Conference of 2003 when the Presiding Bishop, Revd Dandala, was urged to investigate the matter, to discern a dress code that will serve as an expression of unity. The Connexional executive resolved that a plain white cassock would be a unifying dress code for the bishops (Siwa 2018:2), a decision that continues to the present.

The usage adopted by the bishops is that bishops should wear a white cassock when officiating as a bishop and a purple clerical shirt as their working dress. Similarly, the ordinands and those assisting with the laying on of hands at the ordination service are required to wear either a black suit and gown, or black cassock, as is evidenced in photographs in the annual *Yearbook* from 2006 onwards (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2007:334). These usages are neither documented in the *Laws and Discipline* of the MCSA, nor a *Yearbook*. Nyobole (2018) explained that such matters are discussed and decided by the Bishops' meetings or the Connexional executive and not the full Conference, as they are deemed to be 'administrative matters' (Nyobole 2018:2).

Associated with the recognition of the white cassock for the bishops, were two further developments. The first is that some bishops were enhancing their white cassock with red embroidery and piping around the edges.

Together with more and more presbyters wearing a cassock, some presbyters adorned their cassocks with military medals or other vestments, while other presbyters were down-dressing to colourful preaching shirts and elaborate shirt styles. These developments were creating a confusing understanding of an appropriate clerical dress code. Consequently, in 2006 as stated in Methodist Church of Southern Africa (2007), the Connexional Executive requested the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee (DEWCOM) to clarify, the MCSA's understanding of:

[W]hat message we intend to send to our people through the increasing adoption of some of the more elaborate forms of clerical dress among our bishops and some of our clergy. (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2007:50)

That the dress code of presbyters continued becoming more elaborate, is evidenced by an email in 2016 from Bishop Mntambo (Mntambo 2016) to all the clergy in his District Synod, following a meeting of bishops, and attached Revd Attwell's guide on vestments (Attwell 2004:1–3). His (Mntambo 2016) message to all clergy persons was that:

[T]he Bishops accepted this guide and encourages all of us who prefer to 'dress up' to observe it. One of the concerns was the elaborate and often unnecessary additions we make to our clerical attire, such as red buttons and piping on our cassocks (which is the recognised dress for Catholic Cardinals).

The second development is the affirmation of the increasing usage of the cassock as the required dress vestment of seminarians when the Conference of 2015 affirmed the recommendation of the Education, Ministry and Mission Unit that "'Seminarians" shall have the seminary cassock as their official dress and shall retain their secular title' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016b:146). The *Student Handbook* (Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary NPC 2020) of the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary regulates that 'Unless indicated otherwise, seminarians will wear their cassocks whenever they represent the seminary elsewhere, and during Communion and special services' (Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary 2020:30). The theological significance of that decision is not communicated, nor are seminarians given the option to dress using the vestments prescribed in the *Constitutions of the Organisations* (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2018) and the accepted dress code of a clergy person.

A further usage adopted, was the wearing of a stole by presbyters. Attwell (2011) indicates that:

[T]he stole is a symbol of authority and servant leadership, originally worn by magistrates in the days of the Roman Empire and then taken over by the Christian Church to signify who was in pastoral charge of a local congregation or diocese when Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official state religion (4th Century CE). (p. 1)

The Conference of 1985 accepted 'in principle the use of stoles and refers this matter to the Chairmen's Meetings' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 1985:66), with the Conference of 2011 determining that 'no clergy should

present a stole to un-ordained persons until Conference has given its liturgical direction on the use of stoles ...' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2012:95). The following year the Conference declared that the 'stole signifies the two orders of ordained ministry' and that 'the stole may be worn only by presbyters and deacons who are ordained and in full Connexion with the MCSA' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2013:86). The manner of wearing the vestment would differentiate between the 'Ministry of Word and Sacraments (the Presbyterate) and the Ministry of Word and Service (the Diaconate)' (MCSA 2013:86). For bishops and presbyters, the stole is worn 'hanging free in front from both shoulders' (Attwell 2004:2-3) and for a deacon 'over the left shoulder and fastened at the right hip' (Attwell 2004:3).

Nyobole (2018) indicates that the consensus among bishops was that they would wear a red stole over their white cassocks for official duties and that the General Secretary would wear a white stole, as can be seen in the photographs of the ordinands of 2011 with the Bishops, General Secretary and Lay President (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2012:408). This practice, however, has been discontinued as is seen in a similar photograph from 2020, with all officials wearing a red stole (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2021:361).

The colour of the stole to be worn by clergy persons is determined by the liturgical seasons in the church's life, being purple, white or gold, red or green. An example is that of the bishops wearing their white cassocks with a purple stole, the colour purple being liturgically 'associated with mourning' (Attwell 2004:3), at the funeral service of Bishop Fandaleki in 2017. The symbols embroidered onto the stoles of the bishops and Warden of the Order of Deacons, is a personal choice of the incumbent. Most bishops have the symbol of the Methodist shell, religious symbols such as the Alpha and the Omega, sacramental symbols such as grapes and the chalice, as well as symbols representing the areas in which they serve – a Gembok on the stole of the Bishop of the Namibian Synod, flowering aloes for the Bishop of the Camdeboo Synod and Vachellia (Acacia) trees and a giraffe for the Bishop of the Molopo Synod.

The present diversity and elaborate dress codes of presbyters are evident when attending a service of ordination of the MCSA. The bishops on the stage are regaled in their white cassocks and red stoles, as also are the General Secretary and Director of the Department of Education, Mission and Ministry Unit. The Warden of the Order of Deacons and Evangelists is in a black cassock and stole, and the Lay President dressed in a suit, academic gown and medallion around their neck. The stoles worn by the officials are adorned with religious symbols and include others, representative of our Southern African culture and context. No two stoles are the same. The ordinands are dressed in black cassocks, but without a stole, in keeping with the instructions, highlighted that 'The attire for the Ordination Ceremony is a dark suit with black gown or cassock. Please

adhere to this. **(NO STOLES OR HEADGEAR)**' (Education for Mission and Ministry Unit 2019:1).¹

Methodist presbyters invited to participate in the laying on of hands in the ordination of a specific presbyter, are dressed in their suits and gowns or a cassock, wearing a red stole. Officiating presbyters of other denominations are in their clerical dress appropriate to their denomination. Clergy persons in the congregation are dressed either in their suits, with or without a clerical collar, and clerical shirts of various colours and designs, or black cassocks: some with and others without a stole. The Uniformed Organisations, comprising the Local Preachers' Association, Women's Manyano, Young Women's Manyano and Young Men's Guild are resplendent and amassed in their prescribed red, white and black uniforms.

The diverse dress codes of presbyters would appear to be more pronounced, when observing their attire while conducting worship services in their local situations. In broad terms, and this is from limited personal observations and not from a formal study,² a difference is evident between the predominantly black and the white sections of the church. The trend is for black clergy to be more formally attired in collars, cassocks and gowns, or in 'Madiba' style shirts, while white clergy tend to be less formal, dressing down, either wearing a clerical shirt of various colours and designs, without a jacket, a shirt and tie, an opened-neck shirt and jeans and a cotton shirt. An observation is that these white presbyters will usually wear a clerical collar when conducting a service that includes the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion and more formal occasions. A superficial analysis is that such differences are related to contexts of ministry, and the appropriate manner of reaching those being ministered to in the missional outreach of the denomination.

In summary, the message we send our people with the elaborate and diverse forms of clerical dress that have arisen from common usage in the Methodist denomination, is one of inconsistency. It is confusing and is not based on sound theological principles or teaching. Some interpret the dress code as symbols of power and authority, while others regard the formal dress code as continuing with the tradition of the Wesleyan faith and is expected and appropriate. Whereas the clerical collar was the outward expression of a person called by God to the full-time ministry, the cassock and stole would appear to fulfil that role today, but then not in all situations and circumstances.

What ecclesiology do we seek to embrace and express?

The second question raised in 2006 is pertinent to our study, in asking what ecclesiology we seek to embrace and express in and through the dress code of presbyters and deacons. The MCSA is clear that vestments are a theologically acceptable

1.Emphasis in the original document as quoted.

2.This is a matter for further investigation and study.

manner of differentiating clergy persons from the laity within the Church of Christ. However, Attwell (2004) emphasises that:

- It is not the purpose of distinctive clerical and liturgical clothing to give the impression of superior status to the Minister or Preacher ...
- Ministers and Preachers represent the church of Christ in all places and all ages ...
- It is the purpose of Clerical vestments to mask the individuality of the Minister or Preacher ...
- The Methodist tradition follows the practice of John Wesley who, although he was an Anglican priest, chose the 'plainness' of the Puritan pattern of clerical vestment. (pp. 1–4)

While acknowledging these prescripts, the usages adopted by the MCSA at an ordination service and when conducting official duties, leave the clear impression that the services and the dress code of ordained clergy remain very European and present little of the Connexion being situated in Southern Africa. Can we say that the denomination is taking seriously its commitment to decolonisation and Africanisation, when considering its predominantly Western dress code, or is the diversity of dress an indicator of these processes of transformation taking place? Besides, the dress code of the ordained gives the impression of setting them apart from the congregation members.

Another observation is that the present prescribed dress code for presbyters, both male and female, is distinctly masculine. Women preachers and presbyters are instructed that blouses, earrings, dresses and skirts with a slit at the back are 'not to be worn' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2018:5). Krige (2011:1–2) highlights this quandary, indicating that 'male dress decorum rules have been carried over to include them [women], possibly indicating an acceptance of women only if they dress traditionally as their male counterparts'.

Not only is the dress code very colonial and masculine, but also communicates a message of power and superiority. Grassow (2015) observes that:

[T]he MCSA is captive in many parts to a western, materialist theology that is driven by wealth and glamour ... and we want to see our leaders dressed in the garments of the powerful. (pp. 1–3)

The regulations of the Local Preachers' Association (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2018:50), the Women's Manyano (2018:89), the Young Women's Manyano (2018:109) and the Young Men's Guild (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2009:96) certainly confer a presbyter and presbyter's spouse a superior status above laypersons in the particular organisations. This practice appears to use the dress code as a means of expressing a facet of African culture that '[a]s kings, queens, chiefs and other rulers are given this sacred position and regard, those related to them are also treated with special respect' (Mbiti 1969:185).

The impact of clergy dress and ceremony has also received the attention of some of the laity declaring: 'Many ministers seem to have changed from humble, hard-working servants into ambitious autocrats in love with pomp and ceremony' (Van der Walt & Lown 2016:13).

The ecclesiology of the denomination is based on the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers, as proclaimed by the Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016a:

[T]he Methodist Church, therefore, holds that while certain of its members are called by God and are ordained and separated to the holy office of the Ministry within the Church, these hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to the Lord's people ... (p. 12)

The dress code indicates that presbyters are separated and ordained to their office of Word and Sacraments, and Deacons to their office of Word and Service. However, the clerical dress and vestments have become a means of elevating the status of the clergy persons, creating a sense of superiority and possible exclusion of some people. Clerical dress and vestments create an unspoken differentiation between laity and clergy, and between the orders of presbyters and deacons.

An important contributory factor is, that in the desire of the Methodist denomination to move away from a conciliar system of governance and ministerial functions, as in the parent Anglican denomination, to a more 'flat', consultative system with a greater emphasis on the universal priesthood of all believers, the denomination 'diluted' the concept of priesthood and the notion of the ordained as the representative priests of the church of Jesus Christ. The concern is that the ecclesiology of the ordained serving as 'priests' is underdeveloped in the Methodist denomination. This has had a bearing on the theology of ordination and the dress code of the ordained. Both 'overdressing' and 'underdressing' by the ordained are symptoms of this flaw.

The dress code for presbyters and bishops is compounded by the fact that the MCSA is in ecumenical relationships with some churches who have a similar dress code in many respects. An example is of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, and with whom we share a recognition of ministry, serve in United Church parishes, and whose clergy may be permitted to act as an ordaining presbyter in the MCSA (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016a:37). The present dress code of some presbyters and bishops is sending a confusing message to those denominations, e.g. by wearing red buttons and embroidery, that are indicative of a Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church, and the use of a purple stole at the burial of a bishop, as 'When ordained ministers preside at Holy Communion or at Baptism they represent the unity and wholeness of the Church of Christ ...' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2002:15). There is therefore a dire need in the MCSA to take cognisance of the clerical wear and vestments used in other denominations, so that there can be a common understanding of the different roles and stations of orders in the ordained ministry.

The dress code in the Southern African Connexion is also not consistent with other branches of the Methodist denomination, where, it must be said, there is not unanimity. Prentice (2020) stipulates that the Methodist Church in Great Britain requires that, at ordination:

[M]en should wear a clerical shirt with a dark coloured suit. Women should wear a clerical shirt/blouse with a dark dress, skirt or trousers and jacket. The clerical shirt should be in a single dark colour, but not episcopal purple or navy blue. (p. 1)

The President of the Conference wears a cassock, preaching gown and preaching bands, 'with the option of a preaching scarf. Black is the favoured colour by tradition. A further option of cassock-alb and seasonal coloured stole could be considered for eucharistic celebrations' (Prentice 2020:1). Deacons are required to wear a navy blue suit, white shirt for the men, or a white blouse for the women and a navy tie or a white clerical shirt, together with the Methodist Diaconal Order lapel badge on the left-hand lapel of the jacket (Prentice 2020:1). In the United Methodist Church of America, '[t]he stole, not the alb or robe, is the sign of ordination' (United Methodist Church 2014:1) and is expected to be worn by presbyters.

In summary, the ecclesiology that the dress code of ordained clergy of the MCSA expresses, is of a church that is not united and clear in its witness and message to the world and its people, and does not fulfil the aims of vestments as set out by Attwell (2004:1–4) in his article, *Guidelines for the use of clerical vestments and formal Methodist ecclesiastical attire*. We should perhaps not be surprised at this, when we take into account that the Methodist tradition has, from the time of John Wesley, been more accepting of the Free Church tradition and its emphases, that allows for more freedom and versatility in governance and expression. The Methodist denomination allows for a varied expression of faith and witness, in fulfilling its God-given mission.

The final two questions that were raised in the statement of 2006 (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2007:50–51), of how we can best express our traditions and theology through our vestments, and how to establish a common understanding and acceptance of the vestments of presbyters and deacons, will now be considered in a single response.

How can we best obtain a common understanding, acceptance and expression of our traditions and theology through the vestments of presbyters and deacons?

Arising from the rich cultural diversity of our membership, any solution will need to take cognisance of the disparity in the commitment of most of the members and presbyters and deacons, from the black and the white sections of the denomination. The dominant commitment of the black section seems to remain steadfastly to the Wesleyan heritage

and practices, the significant role of the Uniformed Organisations and the influences of black African culture, relating to African kingship and the sacralising of human authority where, as Magezi (2015) indicates:

[A]frican kingship conveys on the ruler sovereignty, power, authority and supremacy over people under one's jurisdiction. ... Consciously or unconsciously, church leaders tend to embrace the African kingship approach to leadership and to a lesser extent biblical servant leadership. (p. 1)

The white section of the denomination seems not as committed to the traditional Wesleyan heritage and is more open to innovation in contemporary worship styles, with less emphasis on formal dress codes. While in the black context, not wearing a clerical collar may be interpreted as being disrespectful by the congregants being ministered to; this is not the predominant understanding in a white context.

Perceptions will need to be dealt with. While some may be concerned at the lack of the colours and dress of Africa in the denomination at for example, the ordination service, they are represented from a black perspective in the colours of the Uniformed Organisations. Their colours convey meaning far beyond their uniformed dress code – for the members of the Methodist Uniformed Organisations, the red, white and black *are* the Methodist colours of Africa. Overall, though while there is a need to maintain our Methodist heritage, the denomination needs to consider the impact of colonialism on the denomination, and that we now are serving on the Southern African continent.

Together with perceptions, the role and influence of usages in the denomination need to be examined in the light of the expressed statement, viz. that in Methodism, 'It's order and usages were designed to give expression to an unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016a:11). In addition: 'The Church shall at no time be entitled to do, perform, suffer or permit any act, matter or thing which is repugnant to the doctrines and the religious usages of the people called Methodists' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016a:171). The Conference is the protector of 'the doctrines and religious usages of the people called Methodists' (Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2016a:171), and holds all members (MCSA 2016a:27), candidates for the ministry (MCSA 2016a:32), Seminarians (MCSA 2016a:33), ordinands (MCSA 2016a:37), all ministers (MCSA 2016a:41, 189), the Presiding Bishop (MCSA 2016a:56), the bishops (MCSA 2016a:67), the Orders, Organisations and Associations, (MCSA 2016a:90) and disciplinary processes (MCSA 2016a:121) accountable for their commitment to the church's doctrines and usages. Usages are important but can lead to new procedures being adopted without clear forethought of the theological implications, as has been indicated concerning the adoption of different dress codes. How usages are adopted and their implications for the Connexion, require the attention of the Conference.

Critical questions need to be asked relating to what is theologically defining the expression of ordination in the MCSA. Is it a vestment such as the clerical collar, or a robe such as a cassock or a stole? Do we even need such an expression? If it is a vestment, what vestment is regarded as being appropriate in both a formal situation, for example a worship service, and in a more informal setting? Has the requirement, that ordinands are required to wear either a suit with clerical shirt and collar, or a cassock and clerical collar at their ordination, determined that the clerical shirt and collar are the theologically defining vestments in the MCSA? But then, what is the situation in an informal setting?

Should the denomination consider a change in the clerical dress code from our Western style of cassocks and stoles, as at the ordination service and for formal occasions, and allow for those who wish to dress-down in suitable attire in less formal settings? Another question currently on the continent of Africa, is whether we need to have a distinctive and uniform clerical dress code. This question is juxtaposed by another, asking that if '[t]he Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church, which is the body of Christ' (MCSA 2016a:13), and those ordained 'represent the Church of Christ in all places and in all ages' (Attwell 2004:1), does it not make sound theological sense for those ordained to be distinctive in their calling and their outward expression of their faith and their dress code?

The answers to these questions remain compounded by our Connexion's situation in Southern Africa, with the traditionally black context being, largely circuit oriented and those ordained often caring for 10–30 societies, spread over a large area. The traditionally white context, however, is more societal with the ordained caring for one or two societies that are in close proximity.

A concern is that the matter of 'dress' is included in the assessment of seminarians, probationer ministers and ordinands during their Trial Services (Education Mission and Ministry Unit n.d.). Ordinands could find themselves being unfairly discriminated against in such a situation, because of a dress code different from that of most of the committee.

Practical matters in contemplating an Africanised theological model of vestments, must include the following: being theologically sound; dispel confusion; relevant to our Southern African context; not leading to clergy elitism; ordained women should be permitted to dress in a more feminine and appropriate manner, including that of their African culture; and be consistent with the ecclesiology and practices of those churches with whom we are in an ecumenical relationship; and be appropriate for all situations and circumstances.

A suggested way ahead for the MCSA, is for the Conference to revisit the Methodist theology of dress relating to the dress code of preachers, presbyters, bishops and the relevant stipulations of the Uniformed Organisations, while keeping in mind the role and influences of usages in determining practices. Only then can Conference formulate amendments to the dress code of bishops and presbyters, in formal and

informal settings, as well as in their everyday ministerial functioning. Their recommendations need to be presented to the Conference for their consideration and resolution. Whatever decisions are made, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa needs to beware of falling into the traps of allowing usages to determine practices, without theological justification, and of legalism that leads to death.

Conclusion

The influences that have formed the dress code of ordained presbyters and deacons, the usages that have developed over the decades, the problem areas identified as a result of elaborate and sometimes theologically at variance with other Christian denominations with whom the MCSA is in a close relationship as well as being at variance with other Methodist Connexions, and the formulations determining how vestments can contribute to the elevated status and power of ordained persons have been examined. The lack of a clear theology of priesthood, as it relates to clerical dress, and the changes arising from usages and not theological considerations, are significant contributory factors in creating the diverse practices within the denomination. These are compounded by the extremes of the dress codes adopted by clergy persons, of either an elaborate or a non-existent dress code. The implications and methods of adoption of the usages and theology of dress of the bishops and presbyters of the MCSA, therefore need to be re-evaluated and amended accordingly, for the decolonisation and Africanisation of the dress code of the ordained clergy to be consistent with the doctrines and usages of the MCSA, and relevant in its mission and outreach.

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