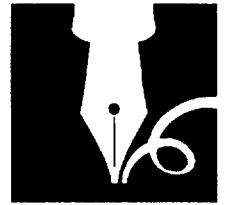


# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## By our love or by our clothing?

In an article I read recently, United Methodist clergyman Terry Thompson explained why he wears the "clerical collar"—a narrow, upright white collar that buttons at the back and is worn with a solid-color, high-necked shirt (St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Houston edition of *The United Methodist Reporter*, July 24, 1998).



Like the clergy of several other Protestant denominations, most United Methodist clergy don't wear the clerical collar. Some wear a lapel pin or other jewelry featuring a cross, but during their day-to-day activities they don't wear other clothing

that identifies them as clergy. In contrast, most Roman Catholic priests and many Episcopal priests habitually wear the clerical collar.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

—John 13:35

Terry's article caused me to wonder what such practices say about our beliefs. Jesus said our love would show that we were his followers. He didn't say we needed other evidence. Why, then, do Christians wear crosses, clerical collars, and such? And when ordained Christians wear identifying clothing that lay Christians don't wear, what messages does that give?



## A sign of a special role

Clergy see the purpose of clerical clothing as showing the special role that God has called them to fill, rather than merely showing that they are Christians. Many clergy who don't wear identifying clothing in everyday life wear long robes when they conduct worship services. Over a robe they may wear a stole decorated with Christian symbols.

Besides showing the role to which they are called, clergy's use of identifying clothing also

## Status symbols became Christian symbols

We now give symbolic religious meaning to much of the clerical clothing that clergy wear, and to objects and gestures that they sometimes use in worship. Most of these features, however, originated as secular ways of showing and even emphasizing class, rank, or power.



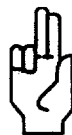
What we now call a clerical collar was what all upper-class gentlemen wore in the 18th and 19th centuries in England and parts of Europe. It had no religious meaning. Clergymen wore it merely because they were upper-class gentlemen. Now, however, we sometimes say it represents a yoke. A yoke connects animals to each other for pulling a plow or wagon or carriage, so it can symbolize Christians' connection to each other.



The robes that some clergy now wear to lead worship were originally academic robes. The stole was originally a secular sign of office. It was used by members of the Roman senate when the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion. Clergymen started wearing stoles to show that they had the same power and status as the civil officials. Now, however, the stole is said to represent the towel with which Jesus wiped his disciples' feet, showing his servant role.

## Symbols of God's king-like authority

Some objects and gestures now used by clergy were chosen to show not just status but also power and authority. The raised hand, often



with two raised fingers, comes from a gesture used by Roman emperors and other ancient rulers to show their authority to bless and curse. Objects like the crown, mace, and ball portray the king-like authority we associate with God.



Clergy began wearing stoles, collars, and robes to show the clergy's secular power and status. Religious meanings were only chosen later, to justify continuing these practices. Clergy's use of objects and gestures typical of rulers also emphasizes clergy's power and status, but this use arose from seeing God as ruler. Using these symbols is helpful only if we avoid confusing clergy authority with God's authority or with secular social status or political power. Otherwise this use is misleading.

emphasizes the difference between the role and the person who fills it. Wearing a robe when serving as a worship leader helps to keep both clergy and laity focused on the role that God has called the clergyperson to fill, rather than on the person's physical characteristics, personality, or personal clothing. Choir robes serve a similar purpose for a choir during worship.



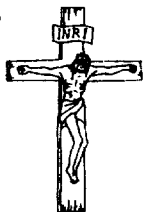
Many clergywomen say they find this function of a clerical robe especially helpful. It helps make clear that the pastor's hairdo, makeup, and clothes are not what she should be measured by. For clergymen this generally isn't such a problem. Men's



clothing and hairstyles tend to be more uniform than women's. Also, we tend to judge men less by their physical appearance than women.

### Undoing what the Reformation did?

Some Protestants dislike their pastors' use of clerical clothing even for worship. These Protestants feel that using special clothing for clergy, like using numerous icons, statues, and rituals, is strictly a Roman Catholic practice and is dangerously close to idolatry. These Protestants chose to be Protestant, they say, in order to be in a church that doesn't do such things. For their churches to adopt such practices, therefore, seems to them like a betrayal. It seems to be doing away with some of the good that the Reformation accomplished.



Other Christians, however, feel that Protestants who severely limit the use of rituals and visual images have gone too far. They have needlessly lost some important aids for focusing attention on God, receiving God's messages, and expressing what can't be expressed in words.



### Claiming special piety?

Some Christians object to clergy's use of identifying clothing because they see it as an unjustified claim to piety. Some see it as putting too much emphasis on the distinction between clergy and laity. To these Christians, acknowledging that clergy are like everybody else is important. It makes the clergy seem more approachable and less likely to be critical of other people's less-than-perfect behavior.

Other Christians, however, want to see their pastors as people on pedestals, removed from sinful life in the everyday world. These Christians apparently want clergy to display perfect behavior on behalf of the rest of us or as a model for us. They like the reassurance that visual reminders give, that clergy are different from laity.



In its early centuries the church experienced big controversies about this subject. Christians questioned whether a sacrament such as communion could be effective if it was delivered by a less-than-perfect person. The church officially decided that it could. A sacrament's effectiveness, the church said, came from God's action and from the fact that the person delivering it was acting as God's agent. It didn't come from the agent's personal qualifications, and it wasn't hindered by the lack of them—a fortunate decision, since no human agent is perfect.



### Benefits and drawbacks

Terry Thompson, whose article I read, sees many of these factors influencing people's reactions to his clerical collar. Results that he sees as positive include getting ready access to people in hospitals, especially intensive care units and emergency rooms. In addition, recognizing him as a clergyman seems to free people, he finds, to strike up serious conversations with him about their faith. It also lets them recognize him as a person from whom they can get various kinds of help. When they see that he is a clergyman, he says, people often ask him to help with personal problems or to visit hospitalized family members.



In his part-time role as a campus minister, Thompson found that university faculty and staff were surprised when he started wearing the clerical collar. He had been on the campus several years without their realizing that he was a clergyman. He thought this might be a compliment. It might mean they had seen him as a "real person," not as the negative stereotype that some people apply to clergy. However, he feared that faculty members' surprise might mean he hadn't been doing anything they recognized as ministry.

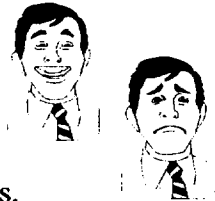


## Better behavior and undeserved benefits

Sometimes remembering that he is visually identifiable as a church leader makes Terry take special care to avoid unchristian behavior—when a rude driver cuts him off on the free-way, for example. Sometimes the collar brings benefits that he feels are undeserved—a cashier gives him a free lunch, or people nod in deference as if he were an unusually holy person.



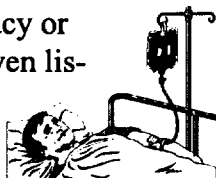
Terry Thompson finds that people's reactions depend a lot on whether their church experience has been positive or negative. The reactions also reflect perceptions and prejudices that Terry can't control and may not even be aware of. He finds that when he isn't wearing the collar and hears negative comments about the church, he can walk away without responding, because the commenter doesn't know he has any connection with the church. With the collar, he has to respond. That's an advantage, he feels, because such comments need to be responded to.



## Lay Christians can stay unrecognized

Lay Christians sometimes wear jewelry that features a cross. This may let us see ourselves as more pious than we really are, or it may cause others to think we're arrogantly claiming piety, but it can also be helpful in reminding us to act on our faith. Most lay Christians, however, don't regularly wear anything that identifies them as Christians. Does this keep them from being recognized and taken seriously as the ministers God calls all Christians to be? Should we make such a great distinction between the clergy's calling and the laity's?

Terry's article made me wonder, "What does the identifying clothing that clergy wear say about the difference between clergy and laity?" Should clergy have constant access to hospital patients, for example, just because they're clergy? God calls all Christians, not just ordained ones, to visit the sick. And when a patient wants privacy or doesn't feel well enough to talk or even listen, a pastor's visit can be as embarrassing or as tiring as anyone else's.



Of course, we've come to see visiting the sick as the duty of pastors in a way that it isn't for lay church members. Also, many people facing life-threatening illness want a pastor to come when other visitors aren't allowed. They may want specialized information or expertise that pastors have. The patients may not have close family or friends, or they may not want to discuss life-and-death issues with family or friends. Pastors may need unrestricted hospital access, therefore, so they can meet these expectations within their crowded schedules.

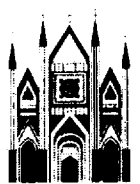
## God calls lay Christians as ministers too



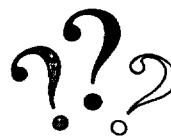
Without visual evidence or credentials officially accepted by the church and the world, however, how should lay people make known that they are Christians and available for ministry? Unfortunately some of us don't want it known. We may be afraid that we don't believe what we should, or that we don't know how to express our faith or provide the ministry that is needed. Yet our wish to stay unrecognized may give a disturbing message about our lack of commitment or at least our lack of understanding of what being a Christian means.

We give this message a lot, not just as individuals but also through official church policies. We often require members to have particular kinds of training or certification in order to have their ministry accepted as valid. We act as if authority for ministry comes only through having official positions in the institutional church structure.

In establishing such sharp distinctions between laity and clergy we may have strayed from what God wants. We may stray when we use clothing to distinguish between clergy and laity. Because God calls all of us to be ministers and calls us all to somewhat different roles, giving the impression that there are only two and that they're so different from each other is misleading.

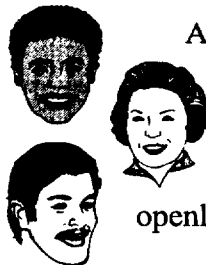


## Reminders of God's call



Terry Thompson says wearing the clerical collar is very meaningful for him. It not only influences other people's response to him, he says. It

also affects him, as he describes it, "from the inside out." It serves as a spiritual discipline. It helps him not to see just his personality as what's "out front." It reminds him not to rely merely on being seen as a likable "nice guy." The collar, he finds, is a valuable reminder of what God calls him to be and do.



All of us, lay and clergy, could benefit from that kind of reminder, but maybe it doesn't have to be clothing. Maybe we just need to show love and justice in action more openly, to show that we are Christians.

Wearing Christian symbols can increase the wearer's power by giving him or her special privileges and status. But in other ways it can limit power. It can put the wearer at the mercy of others. It obliges him or her to act on what he or she claims to believe, and to fill whatever roles people want and expect of Christians, especially ordained ones. It's powerful, whether for good or for ill.

*Barbara*

Next month . . .  
**Birthdays—times for reflecting and growing**



**Connections** 10-98

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**By our love  
or by our clothing?**

**The cross as a fashion statement?**

In his book *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (Jossey-Bass, 1998) Tom Beaudoin notes Xers' practice of wearing crosses—especially crucifixes. Some are overly dramatic, with "writhing Jesus figures." Beaudoin (an Xer himself) sees this as "an indirect, subtle, and almost undetectable poke" at the church. It's also, he says, "an ironic statement about those in our culture who continue to wear [the cross] out of (pre-Xer) piety." In Beaudoin's view, Xers are mocking the Christians who seem to wear the cross as a pretentious symbol of piety and a fashion statement. It's a way to "irreverently skewer the excesses of earlier generations." It's an effort to say how empty and shallow some traditional portrayals of Jesus are. Xers may have a valid point.



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