

## **Q. Why do some people in worship leadership roles wear robes?**

You might be interested to know that in the ancient church, everyone robed. Every baptized Christian wore what is called an ‘alb’ in worship. The alb is still worn: it is the plain white robe that you see on priests, deacons, servers, and lay readers, and it represents our unity in the Body of Christ and the new life we receive in our baptism. At a baptism in the ancient church, the individual would be fully immersed in water and then immediately robed in the white alb afterward. Every person then wore this plain white robe as a reminder that we are all participants in our worship of God; priests, deacons, and bishops then wore additional vestments – stole, chasuble, mitre, etc. – to indicate the particular ministry they held. As the church grew over the centuries, it became less practical for every person in worship to wear an alb, and so the practice changed to the one we now know today: only those with a particular responsibility in leading worship are robed.

Except that it’s not even that simple. Readers don’t robe. At St. George’s, our Chalice Bearers (helping with the wine at Communion) and Greeters don’t robe. Gift bearers (those who bring up the wine and bread at the Offertory for preparing God’s table) don’t. Our choir and our organist wear robes, but they are not albs, they are called cassocks with surplice. Depending on the particular culture of an Anglican church, clergy might also favour wearing the cassock and surplice, rather than the alb. The cassock is seen as business dress, worn during the ordinary dealings of parish life. The surplice is worn only in leading worship. As a singer in the cathedral choir in London when I was younger, I remember our choir master being very strict about wearing our cassock whenever we rehearsed, but only wearing the surplice when we were leading worship.

Wearing a robe has long been an intuitive way of entering into a worship leadership role, and it is therefore not only the Christian religion that does so. Robes are a reminder that, although as individuals we each bring our particular gifts and personalities to our ‘jobs’, it is ultimately not about *us*. It is about God. And it is about God’s community together receiving God and in turn making God known. Robes also provide a very practical way of levelling the playing field in faith communities. In the ancient church, it was important that a rich man and a poor woman would be able to pray together, neither one feeling different or uncomfortable because of the dress that their economical circumstances afforded them. In the medieval church, it was helpful for choir to robe so that people could participate in these schools of music, not based on their ability to pay their way, but based on their musical talents. Although now just worn by particular people leading worship, robes remain a symbolic way of acting out our equality before God, our radical understanding that we are one before God and we are valued in equal measure, regardless of race, gender, culture or circumstance.