



# The Vergers Voice

*The news blog of the Vergers Guild*

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Friday, May 15, 2015

## Modern Vestments for Vergers in the 21st Century



Vergers at Saint John's Episcopal Cathedral, Denver in cathedral purple demonstrate simple, modern garb for the verger

By [Ken Holloway](#), VGEC News Manager and [Scott Smith](#), VGEC President

"In my mind, this topic uncovers an interesting paradox. While our vestments shouldn't call attention to ourselves, paradoxically they precisely should call attention to ourselves in the sense that our defined role in the service, and the attendant authority, is clearly seen by the congregation and clergy. And, by the way, I've always felt that vesting changes my attitude and sense of purpose. I am becoming a servant of the church when I button up for a service at the cathedral" states [David Deutsch](#), verger at St. Mark's Episcopal Church Capitol Hill and at the National Cathedral. He is firmly on the side of minimal vestments like the simple appearance of the Denver vergers pictured.

Where might we seek direction in our search to narrow down what we might wear as a verger in our own parish? How have the vestment customs of vergers in the Episcopal Church evolved since the advent of the Episcopal Church of the United States? What references can be found in support of the style and makeup of the garments we wear while verging in the church? Perform a quick Google image search of [Verger Vestments](#) and you will see a vast array of choices from current day and years long ago.

We recognize our parish clergy ultimately make decisions on these matters. We are mindful that many vergers do not vest. Some vest only occasionally. But for those if us who do, and for those parishes considering verger vestments, what does the VGEC recommend with so many choices and images out there? The Guild Shop offers a [chimere](#), now available in 2 colors, as a starting point for discussions with clergy.

Participants in liturgical services have a long tradition of wearing uniforms or costumes which

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uniquely designate their position or part in the ceremony. Some costumes are specified and others are suggested by various governing church bodies.

Going back quite a way, the [everything-vestment.com](http://everything-vestment.com) web site says that, "... the use of Liturgical Vestments in the Worship of Almighty God spans a period beginning with the Exodus from Egypt by the Israelites, circa 1210 B.C. According to the Scripture, after the Prophet Moses brought the Children of Israel to the foot of Mount Sinai, the Prophet Moses received specific instructions for Vestments (from Almighty God) to be worn by the Priestly cast of the Tribe of Aaron when they were ministering in the Tabernacle as well as the specific Vestments that were unique to the High Priest alone. (See Exodus 28; Exodus 39 and Leviticus 8)."

The most definitive statement we've ever found on verger's historical vesting customs comes from *The Parson's Handbook by Percy Dearmer*, 6th Edition, published in 1908. Mr. Dearmer says (on page 168), "The Verger's Gown - This is a very ancient garment; and the practice of putting the Verger in parish churches into a cassock only (so often an ill-fitting one of the wrong pattern) should be discontinued. The gown can be bought an any official tailor's: it is best with velvet down the front and on the collar, and may be worn over a cassock of the English shape."

His notes reference Plate 17 (an illustration) found on page 289, which is a painting by Simon H. Vedder called *A Procession Before the Eucharist* which Mr. Dearmer describes as, "The verger is leading the procession down the south alley; the chanters are coming through the chancel gates and the rest of the choir are leaving their stalls..." This verger wears an academian's gown associated, in the current American style, with a Master's degree. It has the attendant velvet decor as suggested by Mr. Dearmer.

An interesting historical [advertisement from Whipple's](#) from the early 20th century illustrates a popular verger gown of that day worn over a suit with waist coat. Today we typically wear a black cassock beneath our gown which may be a [chimere](#) or other robe fashioned after the academic tradition. Vergers in cathedrals often wear purple cassocks in their own tradition.

In *A Course of Training for a Verger: 2015 Edition*, the VGEC advises that, "A verger's comportment and dress should be distinctive to denote their role but not to draw attention to themselves." This notion goes along with the concept that the best verger is one who is not noticed in the conduct of liturgy. The course material covers this subject in good detail, listing most of the variations commonly encountered in verger vesting practice. VGEC Training Advisor [Duke DuTeil](#) adds, "Less is always more when it comes to vesting as a verger."

In the Verger 101 session at our recent VGEC conferences, the panel has been consistent in answering questions on verger vestments by saying, "...vesture should be simple, elegant and functional with little embroidery or advertisements."

Another precept in serving our Lord is, to do so with dignity. We teach our lectors, eucharistic ministers and acolytes never to hurry from place to place, but to proceed with purpose and dignity. Shouldn't we be dignified in our liturgical attire also?

Should we wear all the accouterments ever conceived in order to fulfill our ministry? Is there a role for archaic and elaborate accessories like the verger's bonnet in our modern ministry? Or, should we wear attire which is distinctive just enough to denote our role and not call attention to ourselves? Where do these concepts meet? Can they overlap?

We decided to ask some vergers from around the country for their views on verger vestments.

[William "Bill" Gleason](#), former verger in the Diocese of Tennessee, reflected on what it was like choosing vestments in the 1980's when the VGEC was being formed in America. "Our ministry was really an outgrowth from the Church of England Guild of Vergers and initially we wore many of the same vestments as those used by vergers in England. [My original vestments](#), including my oxford bonnet and white bow tie, were modeled after [David Dorey](#), then the Dean's Verger at Westminster Abbey who attended our first annual conference in 1989. I realized pretty early that this type of dress was not very practical or necessary much of the time. Over time, most vergers changed to focus on simplicity and ease of use and wearability." About his bonnet Bill said, "I personally still like bonnets (Oxford and Canterbury), but I do not wear them very much anymore, except at festive and celebratory occasions, and when specifically asked to."

According to [Margaret McLarty](#), verger at St. Andrew's Cathedral in Jackson, Mississippi, "I have found that the being able to identify the verger prior to the service an important part of our hospitality. The visitor will typically find a vested person and ask for assistance. This is when we may provide the welcome for which our ministry strives." Margaret maintains that the simple black cassock is the number one vestment of the modern vergers. She continued, "Being vested in a simple unadorned cassock makes a statement that the person is very approachable and humble. That cassock is my work garment. In my pockets I have the keys, lighter, penknife and flashlight and I have both hands free to work."

"Only just before the procession do I dress for the worship and add the gown and the virge. Many comments have been made to me from clergy, not familiar with our ministry, when seeing a "decked out" verger standing at attention, with multiple badges, velvet and tassels, that, "I don't need one of those in my parish." I think it is our duty to be relevant in our appearance to the tone

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and style of the entire liturgy. Creating an environment of support and authenticity will truly be our gift to the church."

When asked about the role of bonnets in a verger's attire, [David Jette](#), Head Verger at Trinity Wall Street said, "In my time I have NEVER seen a verger's appearance improved by wearing a bonnet. It strikes me as an unnecessary addition that often sends a negative message to those who aren't sure about vergers in the first place. We are not about dressing up, but about and committed to service."

[Scott Smith](#), verger at Christ Church Cathedral in Nashville, adds, "I have to admit that when I first became involved in the verger ministry, I was as excited as a kid in a candy store about all of the vestments, badges, caps, and crosses. It was all so new and different from anything that I had ever seen that I tried almost all of them at first." He recalls at the 2007 conference one verger commented to him that he looked like an overgrown Boy Scout with all of the badges on his robe. There was no room for expansion!

"After I completed the VGEN Training Course and after conversation with other more experienced vergers, I began to realize that more elaborate vestments have a place and a time, but those are very rare occasions for me now. In 2009 I did, however, [wear a Canterbury cap](#) for our Dean's installation liturgy. But I love nothing more than when I now arrive at the church, quietly slip into the sacristy, and put on my simple cassock and get to start doing what I love to do. People don't really ask what I'm doing, they seem to know that I'm just getting us and the space ready for worship and welcoming folks to the space. That is the joy of being a verger for me."

Our current verger ministries often take us to the Rector's, or administrative offices, the sacristy, the great choir, the parking lot, the pre-school building or the audio-video booth. Maybe the most common verger attire today is the [polo shirt](#) or sweater worn while working in the sacristy.

Can we accept that our ministry is not about us, but about our Lord, and dress and conduct ourselves accordingly?

Please join in the discussion at the bottom of this post and post a comment on verger vestments. We would love to hear from YOU on this topic!

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*Abstract: Can a verger dress to look the part but avoid undue attention? Does a verger have to be noticeable to accomplish what vergers do to support our liturgy? What guidance can we find to aid our selection of vestments to denote what we do, but appear unremarkable otherwise?*

Posted by [Ken Holloway](#) at 8:33 AM



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## 1 comment:



**David Deutsch** [May 15, 2015 at 10:55 AM](#)

Sam Watson, fondly remembered as a verger at Carlisle Cathedral in the 1920s, was a tall portly man, well set up; and his appearance was eminently suited to the dignity of his office. He soon inspired the following:

But passing all the rest by far  
For most majestic mien,  
is Mister Watson, who doth bear  
The virge before the Dean

In robes of velvet, gorgeous, rich  
As daily may be seen,  
That folks can scarce discover which  
of those two is the Dean.

From my thesis quoted from James Walter Brown's Round the Carlisle Cross, 8th edition  
(Carlisle: Charles Thurman & Sons, 1928), p-89

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