

Sartorial inelegance

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

Wife Harriet claims to be able to tell whether we are at a meeting of the American Historical Association or the American Academy of Religion by looking at the kinds of tweed jackets men are wearing and whether or not those jackets have elbow patches.

Harriet has not yet commented memorably on the clothing worn at gatherings of priests or ministers of the gospel. There one would expect to find the black long associated with clerical garb. Not on your life. Nor, at most of them, will you find elbow patches, since no one will be wearing tweed jackets. Standard garb at pastoral meetings now seems to be flannel or denim shirts, worn cardigans or tired suede jackets.

The other day I was looking up a picture of a ministerial colleague in the mug-shot book of the ELCA's Metropolitan Chicago Synod. Among the women, six were wearing clerical collars, while 56 were pictured in attractive blouses or dresses. Among the men, I counted 25 in clerical collars, 20 in ties and 100 in sport or T-shirts, *all* truly ugly. I trust and hope that most of these pictures were taken at an informal gathering, such as a professional church workers retreat, where "casual" is *de rigueur*.

Now, you may think I won't be welcome at future conferences after that crack about "ugly." Not on your life. Casual shirts are *supposed* to be ugly. The uglier they are, the more they count as male status symbols when priests or ministers gather. Black, the color clergy once wore, is now the uniform at gatherings of women.

Carolyn Segal takes this up in a report from the Modern Language Association, "Dressed to Impress" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 26). At a session on "'narratology' and melancholia" she noticed that the woman next to her was dressed as she herself was: "black coat, black scarf, black sweater, black pants, black boots; from one of her two black bags she extracted a black case that held reading glasses with black frames." A quick pan of the room "revealed that every other woman but one at the session was dressed like us; the entire fashion report on

what women wear to literary conferences can be summed up in one word: black.”

So it is at the occasional cocktail parties and benefits we attend. Segal wonders about the “reasons for the globalization of black clothing,” especially among women. “Black connotes seriousness, an absorption with higher concerns than sartorial choices; it carries the symbolism of the outsider; it really does make dressing simpler; and it’s flattering to every complexion.”

The males present at the MLA meeting reflected regionalism; the cold-climate attendees wore turtlenecks because they “keep your neck warm.” The older men wore brown tweed jackets and “incredibly ugly short-sleeved plaid shirts.”

Before I retired I always wore black; “it really does make dressing simpler.” When people asked how I “got so much done,” I told them that I saved time by wearing black, and thus did not have to spend energy or time on color matching. In retirement I’ve brightened the wardrobe with charcoal, dark gray and—oh! oh! here we get into time-consuming choosing—some shades of blue. There went my principles.

Is the sport-shirted clergy versus women of fashion a case of two groups “passing each other in the hall,” the clergy getting colorfully relevant to a world in which the black they abandoned might have made them irrelevant? I’d go ask a priest, if I could recognize one among the multitude in ugly plaid.