

Well suited: Wearing the collar

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

Trudy Bush's [review of two important books on American Muslim women](#) makes reference to Islamic dress. These days, it can be an act of courage for a Muslim woman to wear an identifying headscarf. This set me to thinking about my own very modest act of self-identification when I put a clerical collar around my neck once a week and don a black robe with Geneva tabs to lead worship.

I was invited recently to preach at a centennial celebration of the YMCA of the Rockies, in Estes Park, Colorado, and the resident chaplain, Bill Huth, told me to leave my robe at home. Even a necktie would be terribly out of place, he said. The congregation looked like a group of people on vacation—no coats or ties and lots of shorts, T-shirts and flip-flops. I told the congregation that I'd been preaching for more than four decades—99 percent of the time in clerical collar, robe and tabs, the other 1 percent in a dark suit, white shirt and tie. I pulled my tie out of my coat pocket and declared that I felt a lot better knowing it was there if I needed it.

I first saw a Presbyterian in a clerical collar when I walked into the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago in 1959. Copastors Ulysses Blakely, African American, and Charles Leber, Euro-American, led the first integrated congregation I had ever seen. I wanted to be part of it and signed up as a youth leader. I got to know them both, talked to them about urban ministry and eventually asked them about the collars and Geneva tabs. Blakely explained that it was an important witness in that part of Chicago to identify yourself as a churchperson. And wearing the Geneva tabs, he said, affirmed the connection between ministry in 20th-century Chicago and ministry in 16th-century Europe.

And so when I became a student pastor I put a collar on, and I have been doing so every Sunday since. I know all the reasons why I shouldn't: that my Reformed tradition celebrates the vocation of all Christians, that the minister is simply the one the congregation calls to be its pastor, preacher and prophet. But I have discovered over the years that wearing a collar brings unintended benefits and surprises. In the hospital I don't have to explain who I am. And it is fun to walk home from church in

this heavily Catholic city in my collar, holding hands with my wife.

I made it through the YMCA sermon collarless and tieless. But I'll be glad this Sunday to suit up and go to work.