

Does God care what I wear to church?

While my thinking on this question has shifted, at the core of my being there is still a well-dressed girl from Queens.

by [Pamela A. Lewis](#) in the [July 2025](#) issue

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Illustration: *Concrete Wish*, by Kaye Lee Patton

A few years ago, I stopped dressing up for church. Until then my typical Sunday outfit consisted of either one of my better dresses or a skirt suit, stockings (even on the hottest summer days), and shoes with the kind of heels that noisily announced my approach. I chose my accessories carefully, good but not ostentatiously outsized jewelry, a small handbag of which Queen Elizabeth II might have approved—and which contained an embroidered handkerchief. Regardless of how low the

temperatures dipped or how soaking the rains were, I never wore pants to church. In the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, that was the ultimate transgression no God-fearing, upstanding woman dared commit, lest she risk being cast into outer darkness.

I was born and lived my first 13 years in the Jamaica section of Queens, New York, where my British Guyanese immigrant parents and I attended the neighborhood Methodist church. Although it was not part of what is known as the Black church, where the term "Sunday best" is taken very seriously and women's elaborate hats are referred to as crowns, nonetheless I was surrounded by African American men, women, and children who observed the prescribed dress code of mid-century America: suits and ties for men, dresses for women. We dressed up for church because we were going to spend a few hours in God's house, the most important house. Church was different, serious, and special; it was not the workplace or school, and it was not a recreational place, such as a park or the beach. It was a place where respectful attire and behavior were required and expected. As Black people, it was also important to us to dress well on Sundays because our dress communicated how we wanted and needed to see ourselves—as dignified human beings who cared about our outward appearance.

In the early 1980s, we moved to another part of Queens, much closer to Manhattan, where I worked at the Museum of Modern Art. I began attending the midday service at one of the city's prominent Episcopal churches during my lunch break. This eventually led to catechism classes, followed by confirmation.

A jewel of French High Gothic architecture, my church is both imposing and inviting. While the iconography tells the story of the Christian faith in exquisitely carved wood and stone and glorious stained glass beneath soaring vaulted ceilings, side chapels offer quietude for those who seek it. The liturgy is unapologetically formal, with vestments, scripture readings from the King James Version, and an all-male choir reaching back to a 900-year-old choral tradition. In a city, a country, and a world marked by constant and rapid change, my church continues to offer a worship experience that is comfortingly—or, some would argue, stubbornly—immutable. I was drawn to these traditional features, and they have kept their hold on me and other parishioners.

Though there was no heavy brocade, I noted in my early years of attendance that the congregation's attire was also formal. Men wore dark suits and conservatively patterned ties (with a few sporting more dandyish bow ties), and women wore

dresses or tailored suits, accented with tasteful jewelry, carefully constructed leather handbags, and top label shoes (think Ferragamo and Gucci). Only the men wore pants. The usher board, still exclusively male in the early 1980s, also wore dark suits and, on special feast days, traditional morning dress: cutaway jackets paired with subtly pinstriped trousers. In summer, they wore seersucker suits until Labor Day.

I had joined a church community that in some significant ways was different from what I had known in my early youth, but there was very little difference insofar as attire was concerned. The message was the same, and it was clear: The church—especially *this* church—is special, and we should dress in a manner that reflects that understanding. If there was any departure from that unwritten yet commonly accepted rule, you found yourself on the receiving end of disapproving looks, or perhaps even taken aside by a long-standing member to hear some words of guidance.

Meanwhile, anyone paying attention would have noticed that American culture was becoming increasingly informal in attire and behavior. I was aware of the sartorial shift, particularly when I attended the theater to see plays, the ballet, or classical music performances. As someone who had always liked nice clothes and enjoyed dressing up for special occasions, I felt unhappy and frustrated by what I was witnessing and questioned why people—especially women—were becoming not just more casual but careless, as I saw it, in their self-presentation. The change was ubiquitous, and I began to wonder what the point was to dressing nicely at all.

For a time the church remained the last bastion of what I saw as appropriate attire. But casual dress gradually reached my congregation too. Over time there were fewer suit-wearing men in the pews and a decline in dresses or skirts on women. More women wore pants to church, regardless of the weather. Our society's growing awareness of and grappling with economic inequities, both revealed and exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, further influenced declining standards for dress. Jokes about stay-at-home employees in sweats notwithstanding, the pandemic raised casual attire to a new level and all but eradicated more formal clothing. There was suddenly no need to dress up for anything.

Despite my misgivings, I too began opting more for comfort than for style, along with wearing less jewelry than had been my custom. I wore pants when serving on the altar guild, in the interest of practicality. No one raised an objection. I began to wonder: Does God care about how I—and we—dress for church?

This question is complex, as are all questions about what matters to God where human beings are concerned. It delves into the intersection of spirituality, morality, and personal expression. Clothing is a powerful outward manifestation of personal identity and cultural norms and a signifier of social and economic status. When considering divine interest regarding my attire, however, I turn to scriptural and philosophical perspectives to understand the broader implications.

Each of the Abrahamic traditions offers perspectives on the significance of clothing. While it is not my intention to focus on modesty, this is often raised as an issue within the context of attire. The Qur'an instructs both men and women to dress modestly and to maintain decency, reflecting inner piety and respect (Surah An-Nur 24:30-31). In Judaism, the Torah contains specific laws regarding clothing, such as the prohibition of wearing garments of mixed fabrics (Deut. 22:11) and the importance of tzitzit (fringes) on the garments of observant Jews (Num. 15:38-39). Such regulations are reminders to the community of their religious duties and identity, connecting attire to spiritual practice rather than to aesthetic choices.

In the story of David's selection as Israel's king, God says, "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7, all quotations KJV). While this passage speaks to physical appearance, it might be extended to refer to clothing as well.

The New Testament echoes this theme. Jesus repeatedly points to the "kingdom," where exterior earthly values such as wealth, power, and status have no place, a truth powerfully revealed in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus instructs his listeners to pay closer attention to what is essential and to place their trust in God, who will provide for them as he does for the "lilies of the field," which, though not grandly attired, surpass the glorious raiment of Solomon. The lilies are neither concerned about their appearance, nor do they labor to maintain it. In seeking first the kingdom of God, we will not worry about food, drink, or what to wear (Matt. 6:25-34). God knows, Jesus explains, that we are preoccupied with such concerns, which is why we need to look to the natural world as our example. Whenever I peer into my well-stocked closet and lament, "I have nothing to wear!" I am brought up short by these verses from Matthew's Gospel. I realize just how far I am from the lilies.

Clothing also appears in the book of James, where the writer tells of a rich man who, wearing a gold ring and in "goodly apparel," is well received and given the best seat,

while a poor man in “vile raiment” is made to sit under the footstool (James 2:1–4). Those few verses tell us nothing about the quality of either man’s heart, only that they are treated by others according to their apparel.

The question as to whether God cares about what we wear isn’t trivial; it may be seen as a reflection of larger debates about the nature of divine concern. While we believe that God cares about all of creation and particularly about human beings made in God’s image, we must remind ourselves that God is not like us and thereby does not care about things in the same way that we do. If God is a being concerned with the moral and ethical dimensions of human life, then the specific details of attire, such as brand names or stylishness, will be less significant than whether the clothing reflects values and attitudes that align with God’s divine principles and teachings. To this we must acknowledge the reality of divine jealousy, whereby God wants to be above all else when it comes to being in relationship with us.

T. S. Eliot’s long poem *Ash Wednesday*, which he wrote in 1927 during his conversion to Anglicanism, deals with the struggle that ensues when the individual who has lacked faith in the past strives to move toward God. One of its oft-cited couplets, “Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still,” is the poetic persona’s prayer as well as ours. But it is not God’s prayer. God already knows how to care and not to care. We must be taught how to care about the people, places, things, and events in our lives and to achieve a balance in our caring. God cares how we use what we have, including our clothing, vis-à-vis our fellow human beings. If we are, for instance, people of means who can afford expensive clothes, do we dress to impress others and flaunt our wealth, or do we dress to express respect and reverence for God?

Ultimately, the question of whether God cares about what we wear in church cannot be answered definitively; God’s mind is too vast and unknowable. And shifting norms for secular and church attire can send important messages about inclusivity and accessibility. But I still want to dress up for church. When we have a choice, our choice of clothes can convey our attitudes, our personal beliefs, and our sense of self. Once we have buttoned or zipped ourselves into them, the meanings we assign our clothes can even help us to navigate our interpersonal and professional milieus. I continue to think we shouldn’t deliberately present ourselves sloppily dressed in God’s house, but I also believe that when the last trumpet blows, we will not be judged for how we dressed. God will judge us according to how much we sought first the kingdom and considered the lilies.

Still, despite the shift in my thinking about dressing up, I want to keep that well-dressed little girl in Queens at the core of my being. That little girl who looked forward to joyfully donning a special dress paired with a chic handbag and black patent leather shoes I had selected myself. That act was my entrée into adulthood—into my womanhood. It was how I learned about what to wear and when to wear it. In those early years, I became part of a community of carefully turned-out young girls who exuded good taste that was never fussy.

Now, on summer days, one of my favorite outfits to wear to church is a pale yellow, A-line, sleeveless dress with a Peter Pan collar and pockets. It hits the knee just at the right spot. I complete the look with dark blue flats and a matching shoulder bag. On my right wrist I wear a blue cloisonné bangle. Small pearl earrings adorn my earlobes. I bring along a lightweight shawl to stave off the over-aggressive air-conditioning. It is a timeless look, comfortable, subtly in style—church lady suitable. I like to think that the Lord approves.