

Church uniforms as signs of piety

An exploration of the significance of church regalia in the United Baptist Church of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The church founded by the South Africa General Mission (SAGM) missionaries in Chimanimani, Zimbabwe, is now called the United Baptist Church (UBC) of Zimbabwe (Dube, 2017; 2022). Like other missionary-founded churches in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Southern Africa, its members wear church uniforms. Missionaries introduced church uniforms in these churches to foster uniformity and to distinguish between Christians and non-Christians. These church uniforms are only bestowed to certain members who meet certain established criteria, especially at UBC. The departments (youths, women, and men) have different church uniforms. While church uniforms are not a problem, the unintended consequences of having church uniforms that only some qualify to wear and not all the members have been quite a major bone of contention within the church. This article focuses on church uniforms in general and at UBC. The article is a phenomenological study of the phenomenon, presented from an emic perspective. It employs the theological approach to assess the relevance of church uniforms. It recommends that inside piety should be more of the focal point in African Christian churches, not church uniforms that only adorn the outside.

Keywords: church uniforms; church weddings; social stratification; United Baptist Church

1. Introduction

Church uniforms are worn in many African Christian churches, including missionary-founded churches and African Initiated Churches (AICs). This article focuses on the phenomenon experienced in the United Baptist Church (UBC) of Zimbabwe. This church was founded by the South Africa General Mission (SAGM) in 1897 in the Chimanimani District of Zimbabwe. Beginning as a mission, it was later called Africa Evangelical Fellowship (AEF) and, ultimately, the United Baptist Church, the name it currently holds (Dube, 2017; 2022). Church uniforms have been a major discussion point at UBC for decades now. Church uniforms were introduced by missionaries at UBC and other missionary-founded churches as a differentiation marker and for uniformity. This article is by a UBC pastor who presents some phe-

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nomenological perspectives from members of UBC regarding church uniforms. It is, therefore, presented from an emic perspective. The author, who has personal experience growing up in this church, acknowledges the reverence for uniforms within the church. This article includes excerpts from interviews conducted with fellow UBC members earlier this year to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of church uniforms at UBC. Excerpts from these interviews are presented in the article, with pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants.

The article draws some parallels with other missionary-founded churches in South Africa, attempting to establish the place and function of church uniforms at UBC and other missionary-founded churches. The purpose of the article is to explore the perceptions of Christians at UBC and other missionary-founded churches regarding church uniforms. The theological approach is utilised to assess the place of uniforms in missionary-founded churches. The conclusion stresses that inner piety should be every Christian's major pre-occupation, and not the divisive outward entrapments in the form of church uniforms.

2. Context of the study

UBC, established by SAGM missionaries in Chimanimani District under an agreement among missionary organisations not to 'compete for souls' in already established regions (Dube, 2022), has primarily focused its efforts in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe, where Chimanimani District is located. With its members moving to urban areas and other regions in the country, UBC has now spread to many regions within the country. Some recent developments at UBC have seen some evangelism-focused pastors conducting aggressive evangelistic drives into new areas where UBC never had any presence before. These drives have resulted in new members joining UBC in those new areas. Every year, the men's department (*Vakweyi* [those who pull (people to the Lord)]) organise evangelistic trips (*Mubambo* [plural *Mibambo*]) to new areas, one new area each year, where pastors and all willing members from UBC go on 'preaching crusades' where new members give their lives to Christ. UBC is, therefore, gaining new converts in new areas because of these evangelism-focused drives. When *Mubambo* is conducted, all members and pastors who attend these outreach programmes wear their church uniforms.

At the UBC National Assembly held towards the end of 2022, those involved in evangelistic work argued that church uniforms were supposed to be given to new converts on the evangelistic fronts so that the new members may identify with the church they belong to. In this setting, the uniforms would cause other non-members in those new areas to identify UBC and be conscious of its presence on those new fronts.

UBC has a church uniform for women (*Ruiyano* [fellowship (meaning women fellowship)], also sometimes called *Ruwadzano*), men (*Vakweyi*), and youths. The former wear black skirts, red blouses with white strips at the end of the short-sleeved arms, white collars, white doeks, and white aprons. Men only wear a red belt which has black ends and with some writing on the belt in white colour. The belt is strapped from one shoulder end, between the neck and the shoulder, down to about the waist on the other side of the body. The writing on the belt is on the front so that it sits on the chest when worn. In recent years, UBC men have approved the wearing of a blue blazer with the UBC inscription or logo on it as part of the *Vakweyi* uniform or as a uniform in itself for those who opt not to have the *Vakweyi* belt. In practice, one can have either items or both. The youth only have a badge that is pinned on their chests. UBC *Ruiyano* also has a badge stipulating that one belongs to UBC *Ruiyano*.

The following are UBC uniforms, pictures of which were obtained from the United Baptist Church of Zimbabwe Facebook pages:



UBC *Ruiyano* uniform (above)



UBC *Vakweyi* uniform (above)

The *Vakweyi* and *Ruiyano* uniforms have some documented significance, as can be found in each of these departments' Constitutions. In simple terms, the colour black represents that humanity was once in sin. The red indicates that Jesus' blood was shed to wash those sins away. The white stands represent the cleansing that comes with Jesus' blood. The apron that *Ruiyano* wears reminds *Ruiyano* women to commit themselves to working hard for the Lord. The white handkerchiefs placed in the big pocket in front of the apron symbolise that these hard-working women will need to wipe their sweat as they work for the Lord. Vengeyi and Mwandayi (2014:211) concur that dressing or uniforms are symbolic in mainline churches. The significance of the uniform, apart from the undisputed significance detailed here, is highly contested. This article gives the different perceptions about UBC church uniforms.

Back to the National Assembly held in 2022, the submissions of the evangelism team were quashed by *Ruiyano*, who strongly felt that their uniform could not be given to new entrants at UBC in that somewhat 'reckless' fashion. The *Vakweyi* department has not had any problems adapting its uniform and giving it to new members. The contentions regarding the *Ruiyano* department and their sentimental attachment to their uniform, as it would appear and as the article will demonstrate, do not seem to be peculiar to UBC. Some parallels will be drawn from studies conducted in South Africa among Anglican, Methodist and American Mission Board Churches (Haddad, 2016:159).

Excerpts from the interviews that the author conducted early this year with fellow UBC members are presented below, with pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. The transcriptions were made word-for-word as given by the participants (with some parts in the Nda language and others in English), and some translations are given immediately below or after each transcription.

3. Perceptions of church uniforms from interviews with members of UBC

Noel: *Chemunobvunzacho mapamba ndakamboreketa ndeiparidza paBiriiri uri musangano wemadzimai. Ndeiti vamweni vanoona kungana uniform yechechi ino uniform yekudenga. Zvokuti vanotonase kutenda kuti tisu vakapfeka. Vakaona mai vasina uniform vada kuita chiro vanotoreketwa kunase kuti avazi kupfeka ava avangadaropi akadi ingana teyi ari kubamba mupushu. Musadaro madzimai. Ngazvishandirwe Mambo, zvasbandirwa Mambo wapfeka uniform wapfeka asi tisangana teyi ndiyo yaayekudenga yakbona. Dziso randakapuwa ngeumwe wevatungamiriri vemadzimai, ndinoricherechedza nanyamasbi... Vaiya nekukabadzika kuti ndumure iyi inoreketa kutinyi.* [What you enquire about Mapamba (praise name), I spoke about it when I preached at

Biriiri during a Women's Conference. I said, 'Some of you see the church uniform as if it was the uniform of heaven. You pride yourselves in being the ones who are uniformed. When you see another woman who is not uniformed [not dressed] trying to do something [in the church], you tell them that they are not uniformed and that they cannot participate in that way, as if they would be walking in the nude. Do not be like that, women. Let's work for the Lord. As we work for the Lord, those who wear the uniform can do so, but let us not act as if the uniform is a uniform of heaven.' One of the women leaders stared at me, and I remember this to this day. She was surprised that a young person could say the things that I said].

Rindai: I really concur with your sentiments, Noel. The uniform has been taken to extra extremes *dzimwe dzisingachaiti* [way too far]. *Vanbu ngavanzwisise kuti* [people should understand that] uniform is only for identification *yekuti* [that] you are a member of a certain organisation. It doesn't carry your salvation. It doesn't make you holier than thou. It doesn't make you a Holy Spirit-filled Christian because *une* uniform [you have a uniform], no. Uniforms are simply for identification. *Ane uniform asina uniform tese tiri vana vaMwari* [Those who have uniforms and those who do not, we are all God's children]. It is identification that you are a member of UBC. *Ainei, sekutaura kwawaita Noel kuti vamwe vanoibata nechisimba. Even munhu achida kutaura chinbu sekutaura kwamaita anozwi munhu uyu haana kupfeka. Kupfeka kunei, kutaura kunei nekupfeka kwemunhu?* [It's true, as Noel mentioned, that some take the issue of the uniform very seriously. Even when someone wants to speak up, they are often dismissed simply because they do not wear a uniform. What does wearing a uniform have to do with the validity of someone's words?]. The simplest thing *kutendeuka nekuva nehukama hwakazara naMwari* [is to repent and to have a good relationship with God]. A uniform is identification that you belong to a certain church. *Ariko machechi asina mauniform. Nemabatire atiri kuita chinbu ichi sekutaura kwaita Noel kwandiri kutsigira chaizvo, vamwe vanbu vachatadza kupinda denga nyenya yekukoshesa chinbu chisina nebasa* [There are churches without uniforms. The way we are handling this matter, as Noel rightly pointed out and with which I fully agree, may prevent some people from entering heaven due to placing excessive importance on something that holds no true value].

Noel: There are also sentiments *dzekuti kare* [that long ago], you know, when people were still really worshipping God for who He is, *mauniform aya pane zvaitika munhu ainayo* [these uniforms certain things would happen when a person had it]. People, *vanambuya* [old women] would take *dbuku chairo rekusunga musoro riya voriise pamwana uri kurwara echipona* [say the doek used to tie the hair and put it on a sick child, and the child would get well]. This kind of goes back to the issue of using handkerchiefs and so forth, the Biblical way

Jesu yaairapa vanhu [Jesus' way of healing people] and then all the like, but then people kind of, I think *ndipo pamwe pakabuda* [that is probably where stemmed] the misconceptions. Because people kind of thought because *vanambuya vaidaro* [old women did so], the issue is on the uniform. *Nyamba* [yet] the issue was not on the uniform. The issue was on the character of the owner of that uniform. *Because hadzisiri dzese, baasi munhu wese aizodaro kuti akatora dbuku rake kuriisa pamunhu roporesa* [it was not all uniforms, not everyone could take their doek, put it on the sick and then it would heal them]. If it was the uniform, that would be for everybody, but it was not about the uniform. It was about the anointing that was operating upon the person who owns that particular uniform and the character that they exude *kana vari kurarama panyika* [as they live in the world]. *Saka* [so], it's a serious misconception and liberal theology taken to the extremes [jokes and laughs]. *Ndizvo bazvo but pakaiipa* [That's it, but it's complex]. In itself *aina cheyakamboshata* [there is nothing wrong with it]. *Iuniform yakandofanana neyekuchikora* [it is a uniform just like the school one], in itself, but it's being used as a weapon of division, it's being used as a weapon of looking down upon some other people. It is being used as a weapon of classism and all that.

Munashu: *Yeuniform yakanesa kumadzimai iyo kweanotora uniform senzira yekutendeuka. Anoti usikazi kuchata nekushandira Ruiyano haupfeki* uniform. [The uniform issue was contentious among women who took the uniform as a sign of repentance. They say if you have not had a church wedding and have not contributed to the Ruiyano coffers, you cannot be uniformed]. The uniform is now taken as a way of salvation.

Munashu: [At the National Assembly, 2022] *yakasimuka iri kurutii rweEvan-gelism ebiti kwetimoenda teiparidza iyo anhu anotendeula tinoda kuti apuwe uniform kuti anhu aziye Church yedu* [It originated from the Evangelism team's suggestion that new converts in the areas they evangelise should be provided with the church uniform, so that our church may be recognised].

Donnie: *Yakasimuka* due to the starting of new preaching points *muma* new places *anga asati ava neUBC* in existence. So, *Ruwadzano rwanga rwuri kuti uniform yedu imimi muri kuti* at National level, *muri kuti kwatiri kuenda uko kuma* new places *uko kwatiri kudiyara* UBC like Mubaira Preaching Point, even Murombedzi *vanhu ngavapfekedzwe* so that *chechi yedu* will be identified so that *inoziikanwa kuti kune* UBC *ngevanhu mukati mecommunity iyoyo. Saka madzimai anga ari kuti aiwa imwimwi musandopfekedza vese vese kunyangwe kuma* new preaching points *ikoko kwamuri kuvhura machechi. Amufanirwi kundopfekedza ngekuti chechi mwaa kutora uniform yedu kuita chiro chenbanda, chiro chemahara, yet uniform yedu tinotarisisira kuti munhu ange akachata, munhu ange amboshanda, munhu ange aane kuma 50 years, saka ndizvo*

zvaitika izvozvo izvi. Ndizvo zvakasimudza nyaya because isusu tanga toti aiwazve, kumanew places *uko kwatiri kuenda uniform ngaipfekwe* like *Vakweyi vari kutopfekedza* and *mukatarisa Vakweyi*, Harare South *yakatombopfekedza Vakweyi kunga 7 ere ekuMubaira* and *mabhande awo aachina kunyorwa kuzwi Mukweyi, anyorwa kuzwi* Fishers of Men. So, things are changing but *Ruwadzano rwuri kutooma musoro kuti azvitomboiti, mwayeisa uniform yedu.*

[It arose due to the starting of new preaching points in new places where UBC was not in existence. So, *Ruwadzano* [Ruiyano] proposed that our uniform be worn. At the national level, we are advocating for uniforming people in new locations where we are establishing UBC, such as Mubaira Preaching Point and even Murombedzi, so that our church will be recognised and known in those communities]. So, some women objected, saying that uniforms should not be given to everyone, even at new preaching points where churches are being opened. They argued that distributing the uniform to all diminishes its value, making it seem worthless. For our uniform, we expect individuals to have a church wedding first, contribute to the *Ruiyano* coffers, and reach the age of 50. This was the crux of the matter. This issue arose because we were advocating that in new locations we are expanding into, the uniform should be worn, similar to how *Vakweyi* are providing their uniform to new converts, and if you look at *Vakweyi*, Harare South belted *Vakweyi* about 7Km from Mubaira and their belts were not written '*Mukweyi*' [as per custom] but '*Fishers of Men*' [because new converts in new areas would not understand the Nda *Mukweyi* designation]. So, things are changing but *Ruwadzano* [*Ruiyano*] is being hot-headed, maintaining that it cannot be done; you have taken our uniform lightly].

Donnie: *Uye vaitotambudzikawo kuti yei munoba apfekedza anbu aya ngekuti mwavbure* preaching point *musati mwanase kuaziya kutendeuka kwawo nekuwa* committed *kwawo ngekuti munokone kuzopfekedza nezvifeve zvozoende kubhawa kana kuti zvozosingana nemwi ana Dr akapfeke uniform yeUBC* [in wrong places] *azvizonasi kubuda zvakanaka... Vanbu vanonga voti nechiana chotodaiwo ere, saka ndiyo yanga iri concern yawo. Vaiti tangai mwanase kuwetter* and that period *yatinopa yekuchata inopururwa kuti munbu iyeye wange kumira zviri nani zvekuti aazonanyi kunyadzisa chechi yedu haiwa kuti waa* perfect *aiwa asi kuti kuchata kumoratidze kunga kurongeka mukati mwekutenda nemakore e50 years* [40 years] *dzinoratidza kuti waamudzimai waakufunga waakuziwa and usingachaiti zvese zvese zvekusazvibata. Saka ndipo panga pane* argument *yawo yakanasa kuti gwinyei. Haiwa kuti vaiti wachata waane* salvation *aiwa. Asi vaiti kuzonga kutsverudza uniform yedu kuti tozoono kuti munbu uya wamwakapfekedza une 20 years uyo waakupinda nayo mune zvekusazvibata, zvaizonge kuvayeisawo.*

[In addition, they [*Ruiyano*] were aggrieved that the new converts were being given the uniform simply because a new preaching point had been formed without assessing their level of repentance and commitment. They feared the uniform could be worn by individuals like prostitutes who might take it to inappropriate places like beerhalls, potentially reflecting poorly on the church. Their concern was that without vetting new converts, there could be instances of seeing someone wearing the UBC uniform in places that do not align with church values. They argued that the period given for church weddings ensures a person's commitment and organisation, while reaching 50 years [40 years] demonstrates maturity and a stable lifestyle. They emphasised that these criteria do not guarantee salvation but signify a person's readiness to uphold the church's values and avoid behaviour that could bring shame to the church. However, they were saying it would bring shame to our uniform to see someone you would have given the uniform to although she was 20 years old, going into loose living, that would bring us shame].

Noel: Yah, thank you [Donnie] for clarifying this. Indeed, this is the current argument, though the issue of uniforms has been a major challenge for a while.

Several issues stem from the participants' responses above. The overarching theme is that there are different perceptions about the significance of the church uniform and about who qualifies to get it at UBC. Some feel that the church uniform should be given to all converts, including new ones, especially if one argues that the uniform is for organisational identity. *Vakweyi* are more adaptive and flexible when it comes to the issue of the men's church uniform. They are willing to change and adapt the uniform to suit the tastes of different UBC church men, as evidenced in the fact that *Vakweyi* adopted the use of the blazer as an additional uniform item or as an alternative uniform item for men. The fact that *Vakweyi* also give their uniform to new converts on new evangelistic fronts further proves their flexibility.

Ruiyano, on the other hand, are more rigid in their approach. To them, the church uniform is a sign of uprightness. While this is not entirely bad, it presents an 'us versus them' dichotomy in the church. It gives the impression that the uniformed church women are more pious and holy than those who do not yet have the uniform. Vengeyi and Mwandayi (2014:203) note that church uniforms are a differentiation marker.

In most cases, this differentiation would be between those who belong to the church and those who do not. The challenge arises when this differentiation is within the church as well. The fact that stringent vetting measures are put into place before a UBC church woman is approved as a candidate to get a uniform is problematic in itself. It is problematic, firstly, because it is difficult, if not impossible, to adjudicate in matters of faith. Its problematic nature is further demonstrated in the fact that many uniformed UBC church women have been fingered in unchristian

and even evil practices, including witchcraft, among others. I remember that as a young UBC youth, there were women who were caught practising witchcraft on a grave, clad in their *Ruiyano* uniforms and singing UBC church songs. As a result, some people call the red UBC *Ruiyano* uniform 'red danger' sarcastically because of the evil acts conducted by certain UBC *Ruiyano* women. Of course, this is not to say that there should not be any criteria at all for deciding who gets the uniform and who does not. In practice, however, this vetting causes social stratification among UBC *Ruiyano* women and UBC members in general. Fiedler (1998) laments the social stratification caused by practices in African Christian churches that cause divisions among church members. Although he focuses on the issue of African Christians being forced to conduct church weddings, especially in missionary-founded churches, the polarising issue of church uniforms can be said to cause some social stratification at UBC and in other missionary-founded churches in Africa as well.

What is apparent is that people who enjoy privilege, whatever form of privilege it may be, are usually oblivious to the 'lived experiences' of those who are not enjoying the same privileges. The rigid insistence on not adapting the criteria for inclusion into *Ruiyano* suggests that it pleases some to be the ones who are to be looked up to all the time while others are denied the opportunity to speak and to participate in certain activities in the church simply because they do not have church uniforms. The argument for rigorous vetting becomes superfluous when those wearing those uniforms are not beyond reproach.

Another contentious issue arising from the participants' responses is that church weddings are set as one of the prerequisites for getting a church uniform. This is definitely a true case of the mistaken elevated status accorded to church weddings in some missionary-founded churches in Africa, over and against customary marriages. Nothing theologically or biblically suggests that those who have had church weddings are better Christians than those who have not. It is high time UBC and other missionary-founded churches accepted that African customary marriages are equally good and sufficient for church purposes (Dube, 2017).

As mentioned above, this article explores the significance of church uniforms and the place of church uniforms elsewhere, especially in the context of missionary-founded churches in South Africa. It demonstrates that church uniforms have always divided opinions in African Christian church settings. Smith (2023:277) admits that there are both positive and negative perceptions regarding church uniforms. One could argue that abolishing the church uniforms per se would bring some uniformity to the church, but some alternative ways of handling the contentions may also be considered. Allowing all members, including new converts, to have the church uniform may be a sure way of ridding the church of some discrimination and social stratification that come with only a few earning the right to wear the church uniform.

It simply boils down to the significance that the church ascribes to the wearing of church uniforms. Are the uniforms meant to 'separate the goats from the sheep, as in the biblical imagery of what is going to happen in the eschaton' (Matthew 25:32)? In other words, could they be to distinguish the holy from the not-so-holy? Are uniforms merely to give uniformity in terms of identity in the church? If this were the case, then letting every member have the church uniform would be the most rational path to pursue. UBC and other missionary-founded churches that allow certain members to wear uniforms and not others should consider what the purpose or significance of the church uniform is in the first place. It is regrettable that a noble act such as having a church uniform that could simply serve to identify members with a particular church denomination has caused more unintended harm than could have been envisaged. The uniform has caused many to feel ostracised, marginalised, looked down upon, and less of a Christian in comparison with others. On the other hand, it has caused others to be puffed up, to feel more holy than others, and to want to maintain the status quo.

4. Parallels with missionary-founded churches in South Africa

Uniforms, in general, are meant to ensure uniformity. When people wear the same uniform, there is a sense of oneness or belonging among them. Fussell (2002:3) mentions that "... until mustered out of the Army in 1947, I lived in a constant environment of uniforms and in the atmosphere of the human uniformity they were designed to produce." Ash (2012:18) comments on the unifying aspect of the American Army uniform. We can deduce from this that uniforms do indeed give some feeling of uniformity and perhaps togetherness.

However, according to Fussell (2002:6), uniforms do not always achieve their intended purposes. The Sunday Mail of 23 August 2015 avows that uniforms are worn for identity and discipline, but "if worn by people who are not aware of its [their] purpose it can be a source of divisions." Fussell (2002:6) admits that attempting to attain or foster a sense of belonging using uniforms is not always realistic when, in his book, he asserts, "This is also a book about the comfort and vanity of belonging, which everyone has experienced. Every soldier knows its pleasures, as does every person who has put on any kind of uniform or black and white formal clothes." It is effectively very possible to still feel alienated and disenfranchised while wearing the same uniform.

Haddad (2016:156) details how the members of the Mothers' Union (MU) in South Africa resisted "restrictions placed upon them by women missionaries and church leadership from England, which included the abolishment of the church uniform during the 1950s." The debate over church uniforms was also alive in

South Africa, where women, similar to elsewhere, insisted on retaining church uniforms despite contrary voices. Haddad (2016:158) maintains that:

The prayer groups of African women, nurtured by female missionaries with a focus on the home, were established at a time when increasing industrialization was threatening family life. By the early 1920s these groups were known as *manyanos* (prayer unions). The term, *manyano* was first coined by the Methodist women to refer specifically to their weekly meetings known as prayer unions. Increasingly, it was adopted by women from other denominations when referring to their church organizations.

Haddad (2016:161-162) adds:

Thursday was and remains *manyano*-day when women meet usually in the homes of one of the members. This tradition probably developed from the practice of launder-women fetching the washing on Monday from their employers, washing on a Tuesday, and ironing and returning the washing on a Wednesday. Increasingly, as women moved into full-time domestic service, Thursday became recognized as the designated 'day off' for African women. It is primarily the distinctive church uniforms worn by *manyano* women that mark this day as 'women's day'. Each denomination wears a distinct uniform that usually includes a skirt, blouse, girdle and hat in a variety of colours enabling women to identify one another immediately.

Scholars have given several reasons for African Christians wishing to wear church uniforms. Haddad (2016:166) mentions that "the adoption of Western clothing was a sign that the new converts had committed to new religious beliefs. However, Western clothing in itself did not distinguish between "young and old, married or unmarried, widow or mother." For Haddad (2016:166), "The church uniform worn by *manyano* women could thus be interpreted as a reassertion of a distinctive Christian dress that proclaimed spiritual allegiance, advertised marital respectability, and was recognized as a reward for upright living. For *manyano* women, the church uniform replaced Western clothing as the mark of Christian commitment." Haddad (2016:166-167) maintains:

Brandel-Syrier too argues from her research in the 1950s, that the church uniform is more than a symbol of corporate identification that indicates Christian commitment and status. There is a sacramental element to the wearing of the uniform. 'In the donning of the uniform there is transferred an essential quality which is not just associated with it as symbol, but is inherent in the uniform itself and thus conferred upon the wearer.' Jean Comaroff confirms this view, suggesting that the

uniform instantiates the ritual practice it represents and, as such, has a 'magical' quality. The uniform is not only a symbol, but has a substantial quality, inherent in itself, which is conferred on the wearer. In this sense, the uniform embodies supernatural powers that infuse the material world and become a resource for dealing with this reality. When women are admitted as members, their uniform is placed on the altar in church and prayers are said and in this way 'such items of clothing are believed to have been consecrated. Thus, it is seen as the only appropriate dress in which to receive Holy Communion... In my experience during the 1990s, MU members choose to go to the grave with their uniform displayed on their coffin.

The fact that the church uniform was understood by some to have some inherent power in itself also came up in the responses from UBC participants. It is clear that this understanding does not imply that all uniforms, simply because they were prayed for, possess some form of supernatural power. Noel, a participant from UBC, argued that the character of the person wearing the uniform also plays a crucial role.

Conducting research in a South African context, Haddad (2016:159) refers to women's organisations within the Anglican, Methodist, and American Mission Board Churches. All these had church uniforms and, more particularly, for women. This buttresses the issue that church uniforms among women in missionary-founded African churches is quite pervasive. Church uniforms are also worn in AICs. Venter (1999:105-106) distinguishes three forms of AICs, namely Ethiopians, Apostolics, and Zionists. He mentions that, of the three, the Zionists are Pentecostal, emphasise faith healing, and that members wear distinctive uniforms. The difference may be in the fact that the Zionists give their uniform indiscriminately to all members to wear.

In explaining the nature of women's church groups in South Africa, Haddad (2016:159) proffers that:

While most of the *manyano* groups established in the mission-initiated churches were particular indigenous expressions of African Christianity, the MU was the only organization that was a 'colonial import', having its roots outside of the African continent. All other women's church organizations in the mission initiated Churches were started by missionaries for African women only. The MU on the other hand, was an organization with large numbers of white women in South Africa... there was much resistance by women missionaries and the church leadership to African branches of the MU taking on the characteristics of a *manyano*, particularly the wearing of the church uniform.

Church uniforms in a South African context also had a polarising effect. Haddad (2016:170) avers that "Inherent in this discussion is the question of the extent to

which the uniform is seen by women themselves as a tool of oppression, because the practice is that single mothers or those women who are divorced are precluded from wearing the uniform.” The unintended effects of the fact that the church uniform causes others to feel discriminated against really needs to be examined both at UBC and in other missionary-founded churches.

There is a possible solution in an observation made by Haddad, who (2016:170) avers that:

My [her] recent experience from an urban setting suggests that as more members of the MU become middle class, other forms of ‘uniform’ are adopted for regular worship. A growing practice seems to be the designing of more modern clothing from material that has been printed with the MU logo, which is then worn to an ordinary worship service. However, it seems that these same women continue to wear the church uniform on days of special significance in the Church year.

This rolling out of some church regalia to all members, regalia that contains church logos, may be a sure way of making everyone feel that they belong. I have seen and known UBC local congregations that printed t-shirts out with the UBC logo and made sure that whoever needed one could have one without any form of discrimination. Unless and until we get to this point in most of our missionary-founded churches, the church uniform will continue to be a social stratification tool. It will also continue to give the impression that the church has a hierarchy in terms of holiness levels.

Church women in South African missionary-founded churches wear uniforms different from those worn at UBC. According to Haddad (2016:162):

Members of the MU wear a uniform, consisting of a black skirt, hat and girdle, and a white (and/or purple) blouse. joining the MU is through a formal ritual ceremony of ‘robing’ where in many congregations the uniform is placed on the altar and officially blessed by the priest after the women have made their MU promises. In my experience, new members are ceremoniously led out of the church carrying their uniforms by the older members of the MU. The congregation waits patiently singing choruses while the women don their uniforms. The ritual has come to be known as the ‘blousing’ ceremony.

Haddad (2016:162) notes, “But African Anglican women, particularly in Natal, had to resist the attempts of missionaries and bishops to ban the uniform, as indicated earlier.” One of the reasons why African Anglican women wanted to retain the church uniform was to conceal poverty and to make everyone look the same. Haddad (2016:163) quotes one such request, “. . . We Africans are not all alike.

Some are very poor. And the question of uniform helped to let us all look the same. In one way or another, it is something that helps us in our Christian life.” In this article, we have already addressed the issue of uniformity and church uniforms. Although, initially, when the idea of having church uniforms was conceived, the main purpose could have been to encourage uniformity, the reasons for wanting to retain church uniforms have since digressed from that.

The arguments that were proffered by the white women missionaries in favour of abolishing the church uniform in South Africa are worth examining. Haddad (2016:163) notes that:

Mrs Wade responds extensively on 20 May 1958 indicating that the uniform is ‘doing more harm than good’. She goes on to say that her concern is that the uniform is worn all the time and that she has concluded ‘that too many women join [the MU] just to don the uniform – what membership means is nothing to them – they carry on with all their old bad habits... As a result, Mrs Roberts finally responds to Mrs Lacto on 16 June 1958 indicating that in England despite MU members coming from different economic backgrounds, they do not wear a uniform and only the MU badge.

The concern that others could seek church uniforms for the wrong reasons was worrisome then and remains the case at UBC. It is accurate to assert that the uniforms are causing more harm than good, even within the UBC setting.

Haddad (2016 164) continues:

I do know and understand your desire to show that you are witnesses to the teaching of Christ; but feel that if a uniform is worn it should be used only for church-going and for Mothers’ Union meetings, and only by those who understand the meaning of the Objects [of the MU] for which we all stand, and are prepared to uphold them all day every day. To wear a Mothers’ Union uniform, and to lead a life of bad example and poor witness, would bring shame and ridicule to the Mothers’ Union and would not be allowed....

The white women missionaries in South Africa shared the conviction that the church uniform can only be worn by those who would lead their lives as an example to others. This is a difficult criterion to follow, especially regarding issues of faith. In a sense, abolishing the church uniform or opening it up for all members to wear it may be more realistic alternatives.

The issue of women’s church uniforms in South Africa was hotly contested. Haddad (2016:165) notes that “... the matter was handled by the South African Provincial Mothers’ Union; their attempts to rid the MU of the wearing of a church uniform failed. African Anglican women chose to align themselves first and fore-

most with the indigenous *manyano* movement and donned the uniform they had chosen to declare their allegiance.” In an earlier article, Haddad (2004:4) mentions that, “The *manyano* movement is a site of struggle, survival, and resistance that needs to be recognized as an influential space for indigenous women.”

In interviews, Haddad (2016:167-168) notes that participants ascribed some different functions to the uniform. It was not merely to give them corporate identity. Some felt that it gave them power, healed them from physical illness, gave them happiness, made them feel alive [both spiritual and physical aliveness], provided ‘status’ as it gives a sense of dignity to the wearer, strengthens them, and gives completeness, among others.

5. A few Bible passages that speak of inner piety being of more value than outside appearances

The Bible has many passages that emphasise the importance of inward piety instead of outward appearances. The following verses are included here to buttress the point that UBC and other churches should seek to advance whatever causes their members to become more holy from the inside, not more well adorned on the outside:

Matthew 23:25-28:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. (New International Version [NIV])

1 Samuel 16:7:

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (NIV)

1 Peter 3:3-4:

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. (NIV)

It is clear from these biblical passages that the adornment that really matters is that of the inner person, for God does not look at the outward appearance as human beings do.

Christians should dress modestly, but this does not necessarily mean that they should have church uniforms that they use to discriminate against each other. If they are to be retained, church uniforms should be embraced in a way that brings uniformity and a sense of belonging to all. According to Gbenga (sa:14), “Clothes do not make a Christian, but Christians reveal their identity through their clothes and appearance. The Bible does not prescribe a standardized dress for Christian men and women to wear, but it calls us to follow the simplicity and unpretentiousness of Jesus’ lifestyle, even in our clothes and appearance.”

According to the Matthew Henry Bible Commentary,

In preferring the ornaments of the mind to those of the body... He lays down a rule in regard to the dress of religious women... *First*, Religious people should take care that all their external behaviour be answerable to their profession of Christianity: *They must be holy in all manner of conversation.* *Secondly*, The outward adorning of the body is very often sensual and excessive... Instead of the outward adorning of the body, he directs Christian wives to put on much more excellent and beautiful ornaments, v. 4. Here note, First, The part to be adorned: *The hidden man of the heart*; that is, the soul; the hidden, the inner man. Take care to adorn and beautify your souls rather than your bodies. *Secondly*, The ornament prescribed. It must, in general, be something *not corruptible*, that beautifies the soul, that is, the graces and virtues of God’s Holy Spirit...

Hypocrisy and putting more emphasis on the outside appearance were things that Jesus loathed. The Pharisees were constantly lambasted for their insatiable appetite to portray a particular outside image of themselves as the ones who were holy. Jesus emphasised that he was more interested in inner piety. Lachs (1975:385) mentions, “The metaphor in Matt 23:27-28 is most perplexing. The writer condemns the Scribes and the Pharisees as being hypocrites in that they are not what they appear to be in the eyes of men. He compares them to... ‘whitewashed tombs or sepulchres’ which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.”

6. Conclusion

The article has established that church uniforms have caused more harm than good in missionary-founded churches like UBC, where they are worn by some members but not others. They have caused some social stratification where some members

feel like they are more holy than others and, on the other hand, other members feel like they do not quite belong. The significance of wearing church uniforms should be clear. The article used the theological approach to assess the relevance of church uniforms at UBC and in other missionary-founded churches. UBC and others should decide whether the uniforms are meant to distinguish between the holy and the unholy, or to show uniformity, give everyone a sense of belonging, and serve as items for organisational identification, among others. It is crucial for churches to emphasise issues that have to do with inner piety instead of those that emphasise outward appearances.

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