

# SCHOLAR'S CORNER

## **On the first Sunday of Advent, the vestments and hangings in church were dark blue. Shouldn't they have been purple? Where do we get the colors of the church year, and is there a right or wrong way to use them?**

First of all, the blue for Advent was not a mistake, and no rule was broken. There is plenty of precedent for dark blue in Advent. In England, dark blue appears in what is called the "Sarum Use," the way liturgy was done in Salisbury Cathedral, located in southern England near Stonehenge. In the later Middle Ages, Sarum Use spread to almost everywhere in England, and dark blue was the normal Sarum Advent color.

The color scheme we are all familiar with -- purple for Advent and Lent, white for Christmas and Easter seasons, red for Pentecost, green for Sundays after Epiphany and after Trinity, and so

on -- goes back to 1570 to the reformed missal published under Pius V, which standardized liturgical colors for the Roman Catholic Church. But there was no color scheme in the Anglican tradition from the Reformation until the "High Church" Oxford Movement of the 1830s and 1840s. When the Oxford Movement called for the renewed use of liturgical colors, it was the 1570 Roman Catholic scheme they chose to follow. "Low Church" Episcopal congregations in the U.S. seem not to have used liturgical colors until the early years of the 20th century.

The use of liturgical colors for different seasons and saints' days is a compar-

THE REV.  
WILLIAM G.  
GARTIG



Epiphany and Ascension. Before this time there were no seasonal colors and priests wore white vestments year around, while deacons wore white with a few, thin, vertical, reddish-brown stripes.

In the Middle Ages, there was great variety in color schemes and no standardization at first. Each cathedral and abbey had its own color sequence, and

actively late development, dating to the Augustinian canons stationed in Jerusalem in the 12th century. Strangely to our tastes, they used black for Christmas and for festivals of the Blessed Virgin Mary and blue for

a common practice was to use the newest or most magnificent vestments, regardless of color, for the great festivals and to use the old and faded ones at other times.

So you can see that in the matter of liturgical colors, there is room for considerable variety -- so long as the colors make some liturgical and psychological sense. Increasingly, churches are deviating from the inherited standard scheme of 1570 to experiment with things like brown earth-tones for funerals and for Thanksgiving and harvest and dark blue for Advent.

The Rev. William G. Gartig, an Episcopal priest, holds a doctorate in Bible from Hebrew Union College. He will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at [gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com](mailto:gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com).

**WebBonus**