



Advice for Clergy on Mission Trips

By The Rev. Dr. Ted Gaiser

Whether or not to wear a clerical collar is not always an easy decision when participating in a mission trip. You have your own personal practices, you have some kind of leadership responsibility, whether or not you're the leader of your mission team, and you have your host to consider.

The following provides some food for thought as you consider whether or not to pack your clericals.

- * Keep in mind that you're ideas about when and where to wear clericals are reflective of your perspective and culture
- * In some regions going without clericals can be perceived as disrespectful. For example, in Israel/Palestine, there are all kinds of faith traditions represented. Many would say that it's a social given (culturally assumed) that anyone who is clergy will wear a clerical collar the majority of the time ... it's like wearing a uniform. In most circumstance, especially any kind of formal meeting such as with the Bishop or a political dignitary, clergy should plan to wear clericals.
- * In some regions a clerical collar serves as a barrier between you and your hosts. For example, Latin countries (Central & South America) tend to be steeped in Roman Catholic culture. As such, wearing a clerical collar separates you from the people. The majority of clergy who participate in mission trips in these countries tend to avoid wearing clericals as much as possible.
- * Although you may be traveling to a country where you're less likely to wear a collar, you should consider packing at least one shirt with a collar. On most mission trips you are likely to be in your host country over a Sunday, which means you're probably going to attend church. Often, visitors are invited by host clergy to participate in the service ... con-celebrating, reading the Gospel (in English or the host language), serving at the altar and distributing communion (paten and/or chalice). It's not advisable to presumptuously pack your own stole and/or other vestments, but wise for you to plan to attend church wearing a clerical collar.
- * Some thoughts on women and clericals ... of course, only you can make the decision as to when and where, if at all, you wear a clerical collar. Here are some things you may want to ponder as you pack for a mission trip. While there are many places in the Anglican Communion where they don't ordain women, it does not necessary follow that you should not wear a collar. It may seem like a given that women should avoid clerical collars, and some might say that it creates unnecessary tensions and difficulties in developing relationships. There are some additional things to consider, though. In some cases, women in clerical collars may be empowering for your female hosts ... not wearing clericals then



becomes a missed opportunity. Your presence in clericals may also support the desire of the host Bishop to encourage women to enter holy orders ... just because you don't see any females in clericals doesn't necessarily mean that everyone is against women's ordination. And, of course, your concern about wearing clericals or not may be more your about your concerns than your hosts ... it may not be as big of an issue for your hosts as you thought it would be.

- * When doing physical labor on a trip, it is unlikely that you'll want to wear clericals. For example, if you're hanging dry wall or mixing cement, you will get really dirty. In addition, by not having this symbol to set you apart from others helps you bond with the group. Most parishioners and hosts like to see the clergy in an old t-shirt and jeans, working along side them on the manual tasks at hand. It's an excellent opportunity to show them that you are human too, and that you are willing practice what you preach by getting your hands dirty. Keep in mind, though, that even if physical labor is the main part of your mission trip, you're likely to participate in worship at some point during the trip and equally likely to be invited to provide some leadership in worship. Also, as in the US, a collar may help you get access to a group member who has been hospitalized, in the event of an emergency situation.
- * In all cases, you are encouraged to dialog with your host and host diocese about when and where clericals might be appropriate. This type of communication, after all, is a good foundation for developing a long-term relationship.
- * One final note ... if in doubt, it's suggested that you pack a collar and shirt. It's takes up very little space in your bag, so it's not a big deal if you bring it home unused.