

Liturgical Color in the Church

Changing the color of the vestments the clergy wear, the frontal cloth over the altar and other “hangings” in the church is a custom that dates back to as early as the 12th century. However, the custom of having a standardized practice of the *same* color for the *same* season in every church is a relatively recent occurrence.

Liturgical Churches -- Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican (which of course includes the Episcopal Church) and Lutheran -- have always sought to have some uniformity regarding the words spoken, (rites) and actions performed, (rituals) in worship. But local customs, which included everything from statues and decorations *in* the church to the architecture of the building itself, were never regulated and so never made uniform. So, each local church would have its own personality and distinct customs. Often these local customs would be collected into a “local customary”.

Color of vestments (the clergy robes) and hangings (the covering for the altar and the pulpit) falls into this category of “custom”; and so the setting of a standard practice for particular colors for particular churches seasons is a relatively recent occurrence. It was not until the late eighteenth century that a practice of having specific colors associated with specific seasons of the church year became a widespread custom among most churches.

By the 20th century, the uniform practice of liturgical color was white for Christmas and Easter seasons and Saint days for those who are not martyrs, red for the Day of Pentecost and all days honoring martyred saints, purple or violet for the seasons of Lent and Advent, and green for “ordinary time” when there is no particular liturgical theme.

In more recent times, many churches have wished to make a distinction between the seasons of Advent and Lent, and have replaced purple with a deep “royal” blue color for Advent to go with the “Coming Kingdom” themes of that season. And in order to emphasize the penitential themes of Lent, often vestments and hangings made from coarser woven material are used.

So it is at Saint David's. We have a beautiful blue Advent set of vestments and during Lent we use a coarsely woven set with a black and oxblood red strip to evoke the darker themes dealt with during that season.