

Here's part of an article that also appeared in *plus*

Life of Alb

Flugel writes, "Clothes evolve as do bodies, because they are another skin". That is certainly true of my alb, which has housed me, as another skin, in my formal ministry of 30 years; I estimate for probably about 900 funeral services over that time and 2,000 plus occasions of public worship.

Ironically Flugel likens the way we dress to "another Trinity" – decoration, modesty and protection; and yes, my alb is the garment which has been one of my trusty clothing friends, exposing me in roles in which I still find hard to believe I am credible; yet at the same time, protecting me, with the authority of the institution ; in theory at least evidencing modesty in that it removes outwardly any individuality of expression in personal clothing and can be the backdrop of decoration with stole or scarf. There have been several incarnations throughout which this trusty garment has served me well. So well that I intend it to continue to accompany me on my journey to the celestial realms! Will that be my final subversive act? Only time will tell.

In appearance it can best be described as a long white nightie, with full length, loose-fitting sleeves. It is worn over ones normal clothing. It doesn't matter what you wear underneath, or how fat or thin you are, as it is voluminous, so you can just slip it on over whatever, and immediately you are respectable! My alb wasn't mine to begin with; it was left to me by a departing woman priest as she returned through the sky to her homeland to be reunited with the partner she had mistakenly left behind.

Alb goes to funerals

Because of confidentiality issues, I can share little here of the rich and privileged funeral ministry I have been entrusted with, by families who require for their loved ones, "*Something not too religious, but not Humanist*". To serve in this way has been my passion in ministry. I hope, but will never know, that my work with these families has been reflected by one man's words when he came to see me the following day. "*You did my Mum's funeral yesterday to a crematorium full of unbelievers, but we all came out with some hope*". However a few moments I can share:

One late afternoon after such a service, at the end of the Day Before, rather than the Night Before, Christmas, I was exhausted, with family commitments, work responsibilities, and worship leading yet to go. I was having a quiet moment, still in my alb, walking in the garden of the Crematorium, after a particularly challenging funeral. How could it not be challenging on that day of all days? Suddenly there was a gasp as a couple came round the corner of the wall and saw me. One of them said, "*Oh God, I thought you were an angel!*" Then, why, oh why, did I say these words? So unprofessional! I must just have been tired and in 'another place in my head', I replied, (the hurt of decades obviously)... "*No. I never was chosen at school to be an angel. I never had any aspirations to be Mary in nativities, but I longed to be an angel in a glorious sparkly dress with wings and a halo. But I was only ever a shepherd with a tea-towel round my head!*" Horrified, I looked at them... but the man, bless him, laughed and said, "*Well you've grown up and out-aced them all, haven't you?*" One of my greatest Christmas gifts ever!

.....

Another moment of grace from the bereaved was following a funeral at which I officiated in York for one of my retail tradesmen. The Crematorium was fuller than I had ever seen. Mostly men, with serious faces and dark clothes (still the culture in North Yorkshire). I had a coughing fit half way through the service. It came from the depths, racking spasms and uncontrollable. The Funeral Director brought me a glass of water. No good. Oh, SOS, what could I do? I then decided boldness was the only way. I held up my hand and excused myself for a moment to sort myself out in the corridor beyond the chapel, but tossing over my shoulder the instruction, "*chat amongst yourselves*". How could I ever have done that?! Where did it come from? But they did...all about the deceased. They shared their stories in deep, male rumbles in the opportunity of the moment...

Later the widow rang me and said, "*Please don't worry about what happened. Ian would have loved that. We all did. It should be able to happen at all funerals.*"

Oh yes, and I hitched a lift in Alb once when my car broke down on the way to a funeral! And I did get there on time!

Ann Bowes