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The Collared boutique is thought to be Britain's first suppliers of "clergy couture" CREDIT: RII SHROER

The struggle by female clergy to be admitted to the upper ranks of the Established Church took decades but changed the face of the once crusty male-dominated institution forever.

Now they are being enlisted in a new, more subtle, fight but one which could - in its own way - have a profound effect on the how the Church of England is seen for decades to come.

It is the battle of taste.

Almost a quarter of a century after the Church first approved the ordination of women as priests and 18 months after the arrival of the first female bishops, stirrings of rebellion are finally reaching the surface against the traditional clerical look.

The sight of a jovial clergyman in dog collar and dog-eared jacket accompanied by crumpled trousers sipping a pint in the local pub might be a familiar one in many English villages but not one their female counterparts necessarily seek to replicate.

With no distinctive attire for female clergy, many complain their calling forces them to go about their ministry looking like a "man in drag".

One group of women hoping to change that are Rev Sandra Sykes, her friend Mandy Strevens, and their daughters Sarah and Melissa, who have set up what is thought to be Britain's first suppliers of "clergy couture".



Melissa in one of the designs CREDIT: RII SHROER

Originally from Co Durham, Mrs Sykes and her husband Iain ran a series of businesses, including a dog boarding kennels and equestrian centre before she found a new vocation in her early 60s as a priest. She is now serving as a curate in the villages of Great and Little Leighs in Essex.

Mrs Strevens, from Bedale, North Yorks, runs an online clothing boutique under the strap line "Italian fashion - Yorkshire prices".

It was when Mrs Sykes was preparing to be ordained two years ago and voiced frustration at the apparent lack of anything suitable to wear, that they hit on a previously untapped niche market.

Their new online boutique "Collared", which specialises in day-to-day clothes for female clergy, made its debut last week at the Christian Resources Exhibition in London, a trade fair for all things ecclesiastical.

The Rev Kate Bottley, the star of the reality television programme Gogglebox - a cleric better known for her taste in fluffy slippers than cassocks - was among the first customers as she perused the aisles at the ExCel exhibition centre.

Church of England canons set out detailed instructions on the vestments clergy should wear while conducting services but say little about how they should dress in day-to-day ministry, other than that it should be something recognisable as a mark or sign of his (or her) "holy calling".

That is almost universally interpreted by the wearing of clerical shirts and dog collars.

But that is a tradition now being challenged by ordained women.

"It's a common problem for female clergy just finding something where you don't feel as if you're a man in drag basically," said Mrs Sykes. "Just trying to squeeze curves into a man's shirt doesn't really work. "Women have been in ministry a long time now - 25 years but there's nothing out there that recognises and celebrates the fact that women are in ministry, that we are feminine and not some pretend man."

The firm has come up with a range of dresses and tops which happen to incorporate space for a dog collar, almost incidentally.

Their display, peppered with accessories and jewellery, looks more like a high street boutique than a clerical outfitters - of which there are more than a few at the exhibition.

"It is 'round-the-parish wear'," she explained.

"I do a lot of out-of-church ministry, I take services in the pub and at the beer festival. "I wear it in church less.

"Women pushed the boundaries to start with and now the clothing needs to be pushed back to embrace

the fact that women are in ministry too."

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Mandy Strevens

Mrs Strevens added: "The things the ladies were wearing were basically men's shirts, there's nothing for them, nothing feminine.

"They don't want to look like men, they want colour, they want variety."

Many of the tops are made mostly from cotton but with a small element - usually around five per cent - of Lycra. Melissa Strevens, Mandy's daughter, laughs at the prospect of being responsible for what is almost certainly the first recorded example of clerical Lycras. "We will have to do a gym range," she offers, only half joking. "We are already thinking about a maternity range, there is no maternity wear for the clergy at all at the moment."

But perhaps the most telling sign of the demand they have tapped into comes from some of the more unlikely visitors to their stall - men.

"We've had lots of inquiries from male clergy too, especially the young guys," explained Mrs Strevens.

"They just want something a bit more edgy."

John Bingham,- The Sunday Telegraph