

From the Pastor's Desk 1980-1989

The Importance of the Pew

When I studied in the Netherlands (1963-64) I once visited a historic church in the heart of old Amsterdam. I had arrived early. As I entered the sanctuary there were only a few present. Yet I was not allowed to choose a pew until the red light above the door to the consistory room had turned green. The pews were all rented out. When the service began there was still hardly anyone in the sanctuary. So I had no trouble finding a pew. Ample choice! I have often thought about that experience. What a cold welcome!

The seating arrangements in churches have a checkered history. St. Augustine (354-430) sat down to preach; the congregation stood to listen. Easy for the preacher, hard on the congregation. Preachers in bygone days were not known for short sermons.

In some Asian countries today, the pastor stands to preach and the congregation sits on rugs.

Pews have become an important feature in church life. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) didn't like pew rentals. He suggested that pews should be given to families by lot. And after a year every family should move to another pew. The social minded Dutch pastor and scholar J.C. Sikkel (1855-1920) said that all who love the Lord should encourage the equality of all believers. All the pews should be the same for everyone, whether poor or rich. No fancy pew for the rich, and hard plain benches for the poor.

Pews are important for us too. After our return from the Mission field, I preached in Wellandport, our former congregations. And I noticed that everyone still had the same pew, the same place. In our congregation it is the same! We like our own place. A study has been made to the why and wherefore of sitting in the same pew each Sunday, year after year. An American expert on church growth and planning wrote, "the fact that a fifty-three year old man, a lifelong member of that rural church has been sitting next to the aisle in the third pew from the rear on the left-hand side of the nave for the past three decades can best be described in terms of human ethology or an attachment to a particular place or territoriality." In other words, your particular place in a particular pew is your home away from home. Your fixed place gives you a sense of belonging. The apostle Paul wrote, "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6). What a comfort that all who are in Christ have a permanent place in heaven.