

Already avant-garde

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 23, 2000](#) issue

The church regularly gets criticized for being behind the times. Let the culture come up with something and, in time, churches follow, critics say. Let there be rock music and 30 years later there is Christian rock. The secular culture invents horror films and 50 years later evangelicals follow with Christian horror films.

Instead of taking such criticism lying down, some of us have begun to take action, to make counterclaims. This week I have evidence that, when it comes to furnishings, the church has led the way.

Anyone who attends church knows what I'm talking about. Consider:

Pews: They look and feel as if they were made to be uncomfortable. Children slide off them, adults complain of their hardness, and even pillowed ones make our backs hurt.

Pulpits: Preachers, have you ever preached in one in which the shelf is actually big enough to hold a manuscript?

Lighting: Have you ever been to an evening service in a nave where the electric lights are as illuminating as Christmas midnight candles?

Arrangement: How often is the church narthex so small that it can't accommodate even a small crowd of people—who in northern climes are trying to remove their boots?

Sad, how behind the times the church is? Not on your life. It's actually avant-garde. I learned this from the *Wall Street Journal* (February 4). The headline is "The Dysfunctional House," the subhead "Three-legged chairs, tables that wobble, juicers that don't juice, sofas so hard they hurt." As high-end design goes mainstream, Eileen Daspin asks: "How come so much of it doesn't work?" People spend thousands of dollars for prize-winningly designed furniture and appliances *knowing* that they won't work, or won't work well. And designers design them *intending* them not to work.

Did the inventors of pews, pulpits, dim lights and small narthexes create them accidentally? And did congregations buy and build these unwittingly? After reading Daspin I am ready to say, "No, both parties knew what they were doing."

Here is a clue. Richard Cardran makes a \$2,000 set of three-legged, chartreuse chairs that tip, a sofa that is excruciatingly uncomfortable, and a table that wiggles. He says he uses his room to entertain clients who "don't stay long." Would he dream of refurnishing? Never. "I used to say my idea of suffering for art was not smoking in an art gallery. Now, it's being at home."

Firms such as Ikea and Crate and Barrel, Daspin says, design for the eye, not the rump or spine or brain; they aim to make you suffer. Blueprint, a Los Angeles retailer, sells \$500 designer benches for the living room. They are made of "slatted wood ('less comfortable than a park bench')," says its general manager. Chiasso of Chicago designs a \$64 juicer "so renowned for not working that its manufacturer commissioned a commemorative essay on dysfunctionality." Droog, a Dutch design group, makes a \$16,000 bureau "with drawers held together by a strap and a chair too small for some people to sit on." The company's sales jumped 40 percent last year.

Critics used to make fun of monks who wore hair shirts, flagellants who whipped themselves, Puritans who did not want good times. No more. Far from being cultural laggards, these and their pew-sitting, pulpit-using, lighting-impaired, narthex-squeezed patrons were the avant-garde. I hope their sales jump 40 percent as soon as the public catches on to their time-honored, clever marketing scheme.