



Perspective

By Jamie Buckingham

The folks at the little church decided they wanted an altar rail. "That floor is mighty uncomfortable if you stay down very long," one man said. He was referring to kneeling on the old, cracked tile at the front of the room used for worship.

"If we just had some place to kneel it would make things easier," another said.

As buildings go, it's not much to look at. The men of the church knocked out a wall and painted the woodwork. They built a pulpit, bought metal chairs, and "drug in" an old clunker of a piano with half the ivories missing.

Last Saturday morning a group of men got together and tried to draw up some plans for a crude altar rail. Money was scarce so it would have to be built from plain lumber and maybe covered with a piece of old carpet. But anything would be better than that tile floor.

I kept remembering something my Daddy said a long time ago. "When a church lays thick carpet people with dirty shoes aren't welcomed any longer."

I thought of that the following week when a friend of mine took me on a guided tour of one of the most beautiful church sanctuaries I've ever seen. It was late afternoon and the building was empty when we entered the narthex. The afternoon sun was streaming through the beautiful windows and falling softly across the empty pews. I was awed by its beauty.

My guide whispered softly as we tiptoed down the aisle, ankle deep in the plush carpet. He pointed out the stained glass window and told me the price. He pointed out the organ and told me the price. He pointed out the amplifying system and told me the price. "Surely even God would be impressed with this," I thought.

In a room behind the nave I spotted the portable altar rail. It was hand carved from solid ash with deep velvet padding. My guide told me in hushed tones that it was used during communion services several times a year.

"What would happen if someone came down the aisle one morning," I asked innocently, "and threw himself upon the altar rail and cried out for God to touch his life?"

He looked at me in shock. "You mean people still do things like that? Maybe we shouldn't use the altar rail at all if it might encourage that kind of action."

"It certainly could happen, I said. ("But I doubt if it's very likely," I thought, looking out over the beautiful but sophisticated sanctuary.) "Still maybe you ought to give the altar rail away rather than run the risk."

"Well, we can't stand a disturbance now — we're too far in debt trying to pay for this building."

I started to suggest I knew someone who could use the rail, but then I thought of the cracked tile floor and the hard metal chairs and somehow just couldn't picture that handcarved, velvet-covered piece of furniture in there.

"Maybe you better keep it," I said. "It just could be that God might walk in one Sunday and be so impressed that he'd want to kneel (in silence, of course). It'd be a shame not to have an altar rail."

He looked at me with a strange light in his eyes and then said, "Now let me show you our magnificent rest rooms. . . ."