

Liturgy We Live *by Dr. Gil Haas*

Sitting was originally only the prerogative of the local bishop who, at the Eucharistic celebration, was the enthroned president. He was surrounded by the senior members of the congregation, or presbyters, who were seated alongside him behind the altar. No other seats were provided in churches, except for the elderly or infirm, until monastic choir stalls with misericord seats made their appearance. Misericord seats (also known as a “mercy seat”) were constructed so that the seats could be turned up when the monk was standing. Their underside had a small shelf, or misericord, which allowed the standing monk to lean against it, slightly reducing his discomfort during the lengthy divine offices. During the medieval period, backless benches in churches provided additional seating. However, it was not until the Reformation that extensive seating become common in deference to the prolonged musical settings of this period. Until the nineteenth century, the renting of pews to families was the primary way that churches collected funds for their operation. Contrariwise, free pews were common in city missions that served poorer communities. The first non-mission Episcopal church without a pew fee was the Church of the Holy Communion, New York.

If you have a liturgical question or an inquiry about anything that transpires during or around our worship service, please forward the question you would like researched to: gghaas@aol.com, or drop the question in the offering basin. Please note whether we can credit you as the source of the question.