

Editorial: For the love of God, just be nice

September 5, 2014

When a fight breaks out at 35,000 feet, people—particularly pilots—pay attention. That’s what caused three U.S. flights to make unscheduled landings in little more than a week. Experts predict that’s only the tip of the vertical stabilizer. Expect more.

All three emergency groundings occurred when disputes over reclining seats escalated into outright fights. To ensure the safety of passengers and crew, the pilots put their planes on the ground, removed the combatants and flew on.



Editor Marv Knox Industry analysts say the frequency of in-flight fracas has increased because planes are getting more and more cramped.

“Seats are getting closer together,” Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants, [reported](#) in the *Dallas Morning News*. “We have to de-escalate conflict all the time.”

That conflict breaks out over legroom, overhead bin space and, seasonally, where to put bulky coats.

It really *is* more crowded

Crowded conditions don't exist solely in passengers' minds. According to the *Morning News*, United Airlines and Southwest Airlines both moved seats on some planes one inch closer in order to add six seats. American Airlines is adding 10 seats to its 737-800s, Delta Airlines is adding four seats to its 737-900s, and JetBlue is taking away an inch of economy legroom so it can add lie-flat beds to first class.

Treating people like sardines apparently is paying off. *USA Today* [reports](#) airlines recorded record profits this summer. Among them? Passenger-packers American, JetBlue, Southwest and United.

So, what's this got to do with us? Thanks for asking.

Sky-high rage provides one illustration we live in an increasingly fractious world. Even if you haven't experienced it on an airplane, chances are you've seen it at work, in community meetings, at the grocery store or ballgames, on Facebook. And, sadly, at church.

Kindness is a counter-cultural characteristic

More and more, kindness is a counter-cultural characteristic.

Grace stands out in a world where planes land due to in-flight fights, public meetings erupt into shouting matches, and people are plain ol' rude, selfish and mean. Contrasted with churlish, vindictive behavior, kindness provides the perfect Christian calling card.

When you're faced with pettiness, mannerlessness and insensitivity, resist the impulse to fight back. Allow grace, cheerfulness and kindness to bring Christ's love to bear in a harsh situation.

In his brilliant essay on Christian living, the Apostle Paul advised: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those

who listen. ... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:29, 31-32).

Try ‘transformational initiatives’

The late Baptist ethicist Glen Stassen called actions like this “transforming initiatives.” He pointed to [Jesus’ admonition](#) to turn the other cheek, give up your coat or walk a second mile as examples. A transforming initiative is an act of grace so outrageous, it alters the equation of how we relate to others. It is an act of kindness so unexpected, it changes the aggressor’s demeanor and makes reconciliation possible.

In an increasingly touchy, fractious world, acts of kindness—transforming initiatives—may provide one of our best opportunities for living out the gospel. That’s good news, even for a seat-hog.

And if you must fly, remember: Hate the seat but not the sitter.