

Making a face: Countenances

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

Countenances have been much on my mind lately, thanks to the example of the Palo Alto, California, city council. Palo Alto's Web site boasts that the city attracts "highly educated, politically aware and culturally sophisticated" residents, a fact which probably accounts for the incivility of councilors to each other. If the residents were also described as "highly spiritual, religiously aware and faithfully sophisticated," we might expect them to be even more uncivil.

The Palo Altoans voted 9 to 0 to repeal a year-old ordinance that forbade "rude behavior and unflattering personal gestures by council members." Now there are no longer any legal prohibitions against the use of "body language or other nonverbal methods of expressing disagreement or disgust." No more punishment of eye-rolling, frowning or harrumphing, of offensive twitches or defensive yawns.

After a year or so of practice in the minor leagues of city government, council members can try out their renewed rude body language in the AAA league of the strife-torn academy or the major league of congregational and denominational conflict. Councilors could take campus tours and learn lessons in rude gesturing from faculties fighting over tenure or curricular change or voting no-confidence in the president. Both sides—and there always are sides—arm for campus Armageddon, even though people in other campus buildings go about their business not knowing or caring about the uncivil nonverbal encounters next door.

After batting practice on a campus, the councilors can go to churches or synagogues to observe the twitching and yawning, eye-rolling and frowning that qualify congregants for the Hall of Fame of Incivility. Talk to bishops, overseers, superintendents, visitors, fixers or conflict resolvers and they will report on scowls and growls as congregants battle over "contemporary" versus "traditional" worship. They will suggest that you be ready with Band-Aids and casts when the pipe organist and the lead guitarist or drummer fight over the structure of the next service.

Watch the conflict over the percentage of the budgeted offerings that goes to social service. Let the parents of different youth groups go at it over who gets to use the

church camp for a retreat, and when. In some divided congregations labor still sits on one side of the aisle and management on the other, 50 years after a sundering strike. "Everyone Is Welcome," says the sign out front.

Watch a congregation debating the hymns to be sung, the architect to be employed, the arrangement of pots at a potluck supper, the response to a prophetic or, conversely, a bland sermon and whether or not to fire the pastor, and you will yawn at the milder gestures in a Palo Alto city council meeting. Graduate to the endemic denominational fights over pensions or homosexuality, fights occurring in all the 26,000 denominations in the world, and you will forget Palo Alto.

Foul gestures and facial expressions go way back to Adam and Eve's first sons. Trace them to Genesis 4, on the fourth page of the Bible, after a conflict over sacrifices to the Lord: "Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell." We don't know whether brother Abel saw the expression, but the Lord did. Murder followed.

Congregations have better models, such as the one invoked at the end of worship when members ask for benedictions from a Lord who would make his face shine upon them. They ask the Lord to "lift up his countenance . . . and give peace." After which many depart for the safer secular world.