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ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION AND NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION IN THE ECCLESIASTICAL CONTEXT: A RELATIONAL MODEL FOR LEADERS AND MEMBERS

COMUNICAÇÃO ASSERTIVA E COMUNICAÇÃO NÃO VIOLENTA NO CONTEXTO ECLESIÁSTICO: UM MODELO RELACIONAL PARA LÍDERES E FIÉIS

COMUNICACIÓN ASERTIVA Y COMUNICACIÓN NO VIOLENTA EN EL CONTEXTO ECLESIÁSTICO: UN MODELO RELACIONAL PARA LÍDERES Y MIEMBROS

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ABSTRACT

The quality of communication between leaders and members influences the sense of belonging, member retention, and relational health of Christian communities. This article investigates how Assertive Communication and Nonviolent Communication (NVC) can contribute to strengthening interpersonal relationships between leaders and members in the ecclesiastical setting. It presents a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory study conducted as part of a master's research in Theology through a multiple case study in three evangelical churches, involving participant observation, semi-structured interviews with leaders and members, and content analysis based on Bardin. The results indicate that, although the formal concepts of Assertive Communication and NVC are not widely known among leaders, practices consistent with these approaches are already part of everyday pastoral life and converge with biblical principles based on acceptance and truth. Community-specific weaknesses were also identified, including limited theoretical knowledge, difficulties in reaching members in larger congregations, and communication barriers in face-to-face and digital interactions. These findings informed the development of an applicable model, materialized in a practical guide and a gamified diagnostic tool. It is concluded that Assertive Communication, when associated with NVC and theological principles, constitutes a relevant framework capable of strengthening ecclesiastical communion and unity, generating practical outcomes that translate into healthy results for community relationships.

KEYWORDS: *Assertive Communication. Nonviolent Communication. Ecclesiastical leadership. Interpersonal relationships. Theology.*

RESUMO

A qualidade da comunicação entre líderes e fiéis influencia o senso de pertencimento, a permanência dos membros e a saúde relacional das comunidades cristãs. Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar como a Comunicação Assertiva e a Comunicação Não Violenta (CNV) podem contribuir para o fortalecimento das relações interpessoais entre as lideranças e os fiéis no ambiente eclesiástico. Trata-se de um recorte de pesquisa de mestrado em Teologia, de abordagem qualitativa, descritiva e exploratória, conduzida por meio de estudo de caso múltiplo em três igrejas evangélicas (duas nos Estados Unidos e uma no Brasil), com observação participante, entrevistas semiestruturadas com líderes e fiéis e análise de conteúdo fundamentada em Bardin.

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Os resultados indicam que, embora os conceitos formais de Comunicação Assertiva e de CNV sejam pouco conhecidos por parte da liderança, práticas compatíveis com esses referenciais já integram o cotidiano pastoral e convergem com preceitos bíblicos baseados no acolhimento e na verdade. Identificaram-se, ainda, fragilidades específicas de cada comunidade, tais como desconhecimento teórico, dificuldade de alcance em comunidades de grande porte e ruídos na comunicação presencial e digital, que fundamentaram a construção de um modelo aplicável, materializado em uma cartilha orientativa e em um instrumento diagnóstico gamificado. Conclui-se que a Comunicação Assertiva, quando associada à CNV e a princípios teológicos, constitui um relevante referencial, capaz de fortalecer a comunhão e a unidade eclesiástica, gerando desdobramentos práticos que se traduzem em frutos saudáveis para as relações comunitárias.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Comunicação Assertiva. Comunicação Não Violenta. Liderança eclesiástica. Relações interpessoais. Teologia.

RESUMEN

La calidad de la comunicación entre líderes y miembros influye en el sentido de pertenencia, la retención de miembros y la salud relacional de las comunidades cristianas. Este artículo investiga cómo la comunicación asertiva y la Comunicación No Violenta (CNV) pueden contribuir a fortalecer las relaciones interpersonales entre líderes y miembros en el ámbito eclesiástico. Se presenta un estudio cualitativo, descriptivo y exploratorio, realizado como parte de una investigación de maestría en Teología mediante un estudio de casos múltiples en tres iglesias evangélicas, que incluyó observación participante, entrevistas semiestructuradas a líderes y miembros, y análisis de contenido basado en Bardin. Los resultados indican que, aunque los conceptos formales de comunicación asertiva y CNV no son ampliamente conocidos entre los líderes, las prácticas coherentes con estos enfoques ya forman parte de la vida pastoral cotidiana y convergen con principios bíblicos basados en la aceptación y la verdad. También se identificaron debilidades específicas de cada comunidad, tales como conocimientos teóricos limitados, dificultades para llegar a los miembros en congregaciones grandes y barreras de comunicación tanto en interacciones presenciales como digitales. Estos hallazgos fundamentaron el desarrollo de un modelo aplicable, materializado en una guía práctica y una herramienta de diagnóstico gamificada. Se concluye que la comunicación asertiva, al vincularse con la CNV y los principios teológicos, constituye un marco relevante capaz de fortalecer la comunión y la unidad eclesiásticas, generando resultados prácticos que se traducen en relaciones comunitarias saludables.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Comunicación asertiva. Comunicación no violenta. Liderazgo eclesiástico. Relaciones interpersonales. Teología.*

INTRODUCTION

The manner in which leaders and members communicate strengthens identification with guidelines and fellowship within a church. In addition to promoting spiritual edification, the Christian community is also an environment for social interaction, where dialogue sustains the welcoming of members and the resolution of interpersonal conflicts. This centrality of communication is supported by the relational nature of human beings: as “God is love” (1 Jn.

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4:16) and “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18), connection and its communicative expression are a structural part of human existence.

When this connection is fragile, or when a member lacks the conviction of belonging and acceptance, it is common for them to suppress their needs to maintain group acceptance. Relationships that should foster growth then become a source of burden. Restoring these connections depends not only on the desire to remain connected to others but on the ability to speak truth with love, to establish healthy boundaries, and to practice active listening, which is summarized in the biblical exhortation to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15).

It is in light of this scenario that Assertive Communication presents itself as a relevant resource for faith communities. Unlike passive communication, marked by difficulty in expressing thoughts and needs; aggressive communication, which seeks to win through speech without openness to others; and passive-aggressive communication, which expresses disagreement indirectly through sarcasm or hostility, assertive conduct combines clarity, empathy, and intentionality. According to Primo and Bucci (2020, p. 1), it “constitutes an essential resource in the development of emotional intelligence, as it enables the individual to express their opinions, feelings, and needs clearly, objectively, and respectfully,” which underpins relational balance.

Despite its relevance, many churches still face internal communication challenges that create distance between leadership and members, difficulty in conflict resolution, and a lack of safe spaces for expressing human vulnerabilities. Even small groups, designed as environments for discipleship and intimacy, often replicate merely motivational speeches, limiting genuine acceptance. Added to this is a gap in scientific literature: although there are consistent studies on Assertive Communication in organizational, educational, and health contexts, its systematic application to the ecclesiastical environment remains underexplored.

It is into this gap that the present investigation is inserted, whose research problem consisted of the following question: in what way can Assertive Communication and Nonviolent Communication (NVC) contribute to leadership and members in the ecclesiastical environment? Based on this premise, the general objective was defined as developing a relational model that would contribute to strengthening relationships between leaders and members, with specific objectives: to identify attributes conducive to the pastoral context, to organize its theoretical foundations in light of theology, and to theoretically structure this articulation for the benefit of the researched communities. This article presents a part of this study, prioritizing the theoretical foundation that supports the model and the predominant results of the empirical research.

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1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Assertive Communication

Assertive Communication constitutes an interpersonal skill that favors the development of emotional intelligence (Primo and Bucci, 2020), allowing individuals to express feelings, needs, and opinions clearly and respectfully, without resorting to submission or imposition. Unlike passive communication, aggressive communication, or passive-aggressive communication, Assertive Communication is based on pillars such as clarity, empathy, active listening, and responsibility for one's own speech, characteristics that define it as a relational stance, going beyond the use of purely technical resources.

In the corporate environment, Benatti and Becker (2021) describe the assertive communicator as one who mediates conflicts without imposing themselves, values diversity without abandoning their guidelines, and stimulates dialogue while maintaining their own position. This pursuit of balance, when transposed to the ecclesiastical context, approaches the biblical precept of speaking the “truth in love” (Eph. 4:15), which demands the ability to be honest without hurting, to correct without humiliating, and to disagree without breaking fellowship.

It is important to emphasize that Assertive Communication goes beyond the simple transmission of information, as, while the latter is limited to the exchange of content, assertive dialogue contributes to the creation of meaningful connections, strengthening the bonds between pastors, ministry leaders, and members. This dynamic is especially relevant in religious communities, where interpersonal connection is a building block of church life and the fellowship among its members.

1.2. Nonviolent Communication

Proposed by Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication is organized into four components, which include observation without judgment, identification of feelings, recognition of needs, and the formulation of clear requests. According to the author, these components equip individuals to overcome divisions and build empathy (Rosenberg, 2015). The central premise of NVC is that human conflicts primarily stem from communication marked by judgment and imposition, and that overcoming these impasses is achieved through genuine listening to one's own needs and the needs of others.

Rosenberg (2015, p. 116-117) also draws attention to the gap that often exists between the content conveyed and the message received. The author highlights the importance of actively verifying the interlocutor's understanding, which can be done through a simple question or by

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asking them to rephrase in their own words what they have understood, thereby correcting potential misunderstandings before they become conflicts.

Empirical studies corroborate the effects of this approach. Pereira and Durgante (2025) identified that NVC interventions increase self-esteem, self-compassion, and socio-emotional skills, while reducing anxiety and irritation. Koopman and Seliga (2021) observed that the practice of NVC in debates on controversial topics fostered greater mutual respect and empathy. Adriani *et al.* (2024) found that NVC reduces interpersonal violence and improves the work environment. These results reinforce the applicability of this approach to other intense relational contexts, such as the ecclesiastical one.

Adding to these approaches is the contribution of Brown (2021), for whom vulnerability and authenticity are essential conditions for any significant bond. Her notion of “gentle clarity” directly aligns with Rosenberg's proposal, as, for both authors, truth only fulfills its relational function when associated with otherness and consideration for the interlocutor. In the same vein, Neff and Germer (2018) maintain that empathy with others depends, first, on a compassionate relationship with oneself. This perspective is particularly relevant in religious contexts, where idealizations and the pursuit of utopian standards often inhibit transparency and compromise the capacity for listening.

1.3. Leadership and assertiveness

Assertive Communication also proves to be decisive for the exercise of leadership. Ribeiro (2024) argues that ecclesiastical or institutional governance depends on a clear communicative process, based on active listening and empathy, capable of offering openness for the expression of human frailties without resorting to purely motivational speeches. For the author, assertive leaders define and manage expectations, offer respectful feedback, and simultaneously develop their emotional intelligence. Green (2025) adds that effective leadership is not restricted to technical authority but adopts a stance that strengthens the autonomy, bonds, and trust of their subordinates.

Primo and Bucci (2020) and Benatti and Becker (2021) agree that leadership is, above all, knowing how to communicate with sensitivity and clarity, avoiding the oscillation between rigidity and omission that usually compromises the internal dynamics of institutions. Dal Maso (2021), from the perspective of organizational hospitality, proposes that assertive leadership is born from attention to small daily gestures and from the respect for cultural and religious differences. This principle underpinned the approach developed in the ecclesiastical context, aiming to structure community actions based on relational empathy.

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1.4. Assertive Communication and Nonviolent Communication in the ecclesiastical context

Transposed to church life, the principles of Assertive Communication and NVC gain an additional layer of meaning: it is not just about relational effectiveness, but about coherence between lived faith and communicated faith. Coelho (2020) highlights that assertiveness, as a relational competence, requires coherence between feelings, needs, goals, and communicative intentions. This premise, in biblical vocabulary, approaches the requirement that the Christian's speech reflect the “mind of Christ”, and not just personal convictions defended with firmness.

The research identified that many conflicts and overloads in Christian communities do not arise from doctrinal differences, but from failures in how messages are transmitted and received, such as overly verticalized communication, scarcity of favorable environments for dialogue, and difficulty in expressing internal demands. In this sense, applying NVC and Assertive Communication to the ecclesiastical context does not mean importing a secular vocabulary into the church, but recognizing that principles already present in the Christian tradition, such as love for one's neighbor, compassion, forgiveness, and sensitive listening, find, in these approaches, a structured language to become daily practice.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative approach, descriptive and exploratory in nature, with a multiple case study design (Yin, 2016), which favors comparative analysis between different units and contexts. Three Christian communities were investigated, referred to in this article as Church A, Church B, and Church C. This choice sought to broaden the understanding of Assertive Communication in distinct geographical and cultural contexts.

The methodological path was organized into four phases: (1) theoretical foundation and planning, with the construction of instruments and obtaining institutional authorizations; (2) data collection, involving observations, interviews, and documentary analysis; (3) data analysis and model construction, with categorization and interpretation in light of content analysis (Bardin, 2011); and (4) discussion of results in light of the literature and systematization of final propositions, which resulted in the development of an instrument focused on the daily life of the churches considered.

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3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Communicational diagnosis in the three churches

Content analysis revealed that, in the three communities, leaders and members agree on the importance of communication clarity, although they attribute distinct nuances to it. In Church A, assertiveness was mainly associated with the absence of authoritarianism: for one participant, it is the “ability to communicate, that is, to express thoughts without being bossy or aggressive”; for another, it occurs “when what one wants to express becomes clear to the listener.” The biblical reference “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) appeared recurrently in the statements, but the data revealed an absence of an institutional standard: while some described leadership as “simple and direct”, others classified it as “a flawed approach, with too much authority and little understanding.” It was also noted that two participants were unaware of the term “Assertive Communication” itself, and one of the leaders acknowledged that he intuitively applies principles of NVC, stating “I try to be 100% present, without rushing [...] and try to understand the root” without, however, knowing the method's name.

In Church B, the consensus revolved around three factors: clarity, respect, and love, explicitly associated with the biblical reference. Participants particularly valued the ease of understanding the message, considering ideal a “communication that works, where everyone understands and can put it into practice”. However, the institution's size proved to be a distancing factor, as evidenced in the statement, “in large churches, often the leadership cannot have direct communication with everyone”. In contrast, part of the leadership in this church demonstrated spontaneous familiarity with the four components of NVC proposed by Rosenberg (2015), understanding the stages of observation, feeling, need, and request. This data suggests that the challenge there is not conceptual, but one of scale and reach.

In Church C, assertiveness was described as speaking “directly to the point”, associated with the care not to offend or hurt others. Three of the four leaders interviewed spontaneously mentioned the components of NVC, and pastoral listening was described in terms such as “listening with the heart and not with the ears.” The main challenge identified in this community was restricted to the structural sphere, involving communication failures through digital channels and in the dissemination of notices. These disruptions caused, in the words of one participant, “temporary demotivation until resolved”.

Taken together, the three diagnoses reveal a relevant pattern: although the technical vocabulary of Assertive Communication and NVC is little known by the participants, pastoral practices compatible with these approaches already integrate ministerial daily life, anchored in

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widely shared biblical references. The identified weaknesses, however, are specific to each context, including the lack of theoretical knowledge among leadership in Church A, the engagement challenges resulting from the large size of Church B, and the disruptions in digital channels in Church C. This scenario supports the urgency of instruments that translate these principles into replicable practice, and not just into concept.

3.2. An applicable model for the ecclesiastical context

Based on this diagnosis, a model of Assertive Communication structured in three pillars was developed: clarity and truth, based on Eph. 4:15; compassionate interpersonal relationships, resulting from the practical application of assertiveness; and practical relevance, focused on the daily implementation of active listening and the strengthening of community bonds. This model was converted into two products for direct application.

The first is a guideline booklet, which presents the four components of NVC (Rosenberg, 2015) applied to concrete situations in church life. This material is aimed at both leaders, with the intention of offering resources to guide, correct, and edify without hurting, and at members, encouraged to express their voice with respect and to listen without hasty judgments. The second product is a gamified diagnostic tool, organized into eight thematic axes: expression and clarity, active listening, assertive posture, boundary management, interpersonal conflicts, digital communication, feedback, and assertive leadership. In this tool, the participant chooses the alternative that best represents clear, respectful communication aligned with Christian principles. Thus, the instrument fulfills the function of stimulating reflection on one's own way of communicating, which favors the practical assimilation of the concepts discussed in this article.

The relevance of these two products lies in mitigating the fragilities pointed out in the research results: the booklet directly addresses the gap in theoretical knowledge observed in Church A; the interactive and replicable format of the diagnostic tool responds to the scale challenge reported in Church B; and the model's structure, by systematizing objective guidelines, contributes to reducing the institutional communication noise pointed out in Church C.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The purpose of this article was to investigate how Assertive Communication and Nonviolent Communication can contribute to strengthening relationships between leaders and members of the ecclesiastical environment. The results confirm that communication is not a secondary aspect of church life, but a structuring element of human relationships, trust-building,

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and members' sense of belonging. The three hypotheses that guided the original research were confirmed: the incorporation of NVC into the ecclesiastical environment is related to the improvement of interpersonal relationships; its application in small groups favors greater empathy and active listening; and its integration with biblical principles enhances these results, by directly dialoguing with the theological and spiritual identity of the communities involved.

A central finding of this investigation is that the gap observed in the communities involved is not, for the most part, due to an absence of relational values, as love, listening, and compassion are widely recognized as central to Christian life. The challenge lies, however, in the lack of a structured language capable of translating these values into everyday communication practices. At this point, Assertive Communication and NVC prove relevant, acting not as concepts foreign to the faith, but as tools that give practical form to principles already present in the Christian tradition.

An original contribution of this work is that it converted the results into instruments with direct application, through the booklet and the gamified diagnosis tool. This initiative aimed at bringing together the academic production and the reality experienced in churches, ministries, and by leaders. The small number of communities considered is acknowledged as a limitation, which indicates the need for future studies to validate the proposed model on larger samples, different religious identities, and social/cultural contexts. Similarly, it is recommended that longitudinal studies be carried out to measure the impact of these tools based on metrics such as member recurrence and conflict reduction. Finally, the conclusion is that Assertive Communication, when integrated with biblical principles of truth, love, and mutual edification, represents an essential competence for Christian communities that wish to have relationships that are more authentic, welcoming and aligned with the gospel values.

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