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Nonviolent Communication: A Humanizing Ecclesial and Educational Practice

THIS ARTICLE PRESENTS Nonviolent Communication (NVC) as a humanizing ecclesial and educational practice. NVC is a four-step process of communication designed to facilitate empathy and honesty between individuals and groups. Through an interdisciplinary dialogue with Reformed theology, this article argues that NVC is one concrete means of living as those made in the image of God in churches and seminaries too often marked by entrenched power struggles and vitriolic discourse. It identifies numerous ways in which NVC can help prepare seminarians for the complex challenges of ministry in today's world. It suggests general guidelines for teaching nonviolently in the context of seminary education. While the article focuses on teaching NVC in theological education, it is applicable to a wide variety of educational contexts. Originally presented as a paper at the 2007 Reimagining Educational Excellence conference sponsored by the Kuyers Institute for Teaching and Learning at Calvin College.

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Theological education can no longer avoid the problem of polarizing and vitriolic discourse within the church. Mainline Protestant denominations hemorrhage members as factions square off against each other in yearly debates about sexuality. High-profile church leaders vilify other nations and people groups. Congregations fracture due to conflicts over money, programs, and personnel. Pastors become disheartened by complaints made behind their backs and bewildered by families rent apart by accusations, ad hominem attacks, and misunderstanding. Youth leaders wonder how to instill respectful communication in a culture of increasing incivility and rudeness.

How do seminaries equip ministers so that they have the character and competencies needed to communicate in ways that uphold the humanity of others? How do seminaries prepare ministers to establish patterns of congregational and denominational discourse that reconcile rather than alienate those of differing perspectives and beliefs? How does theological education foster peace and respect in a diverse and complex world?

Teaching Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is one way for theological educators to support peaceful, just, and humanizing discourse within the church. It can help ministers stay connected to others and themselves in the midst of disagreement and dissension. As this article demonstrates, NVC can become a humanizing *ecclesial* and *educational* practice when interpreted within the concep-

tual framework of theological anthropology. It provides practical ways for church leaders and members to treat one another as persons made in the image of God. When it pervades not only the content but also the process of seminary education, NVC enables professors to embody peaceful and humanizing discourse. In short, teaching Nonviolent Communication helps equip future ministers to live in correspondence to Jesus Christ, the True Human, as they face the complexities of congregational ministry and public leadership today.

An Overview of NVC

Nonviolent Communication emerged in the 1960s. Marshall Rosenberg, a trained clinical psychologist, became increasingly disturbed by the dissension, antagonism, and violence that met the cries for liberation all around him. Convinced that skills in empathy and honesty should not be left to the helping professions alone, he sought to create a model of communication that facilitates connection among people, particularly those at odds with one another. Rosenberg has spent virtually his entire career developing this model of communication. In his early years, he consulted with public schools, coaching students, teachers, and administrators in using this model of communication. Since then he has acted as a mediator between Palestinians and Jews in the Middle East, between the Hutus and Tutsis in Africa, and between police and gang members in the inner cities of America (Rosenberg, 2003b, pp. 1–14, 171).

The Center for Nonviolent Communication has grown into an international peacemaking organization with teachers and trainers in Eastern and Western Europe, the Middle East, Russia, Asia, Africa, and in North and South America (*NVC around the World*, 2008). NVC is taught in schools and prisons, in churches and community centers, in colleges and universities. Teachers have developed curricular materials to use with children from kindergarten through high school (Dalton & Fairchild, 2004; Hart & Hodson, 2004; Rosenberg, 2003a). Practice groups are springing up all over the world and applying NVC to a wide array of complex, painful, and conflicted situations.

At the most basic level, Nonviolent Communication consists of four skills: (1) differentiating observations from evaluations; (2) identifying, experiencing, and expressing feelings; (3) connecting feelings to needs; and (4) making and responding to requests in order to contribute to human flourishing. These skills are used in three modes: (1) honest expression, (2) empathic reception, and (3) self-empathy. (See diagram below.) Honest expression involves clearly stating one's own observations, feelings, needs, and requests. Empathic reception involves non-anxious presence and an ability to reflect back to another person their own observations without the accompanying evaluations. It involves intuitively sensing the feelings and needs of another person and creating space for requests to emerge from identification of these needs. Self-empathy involves the ability to recognize and transform life-alienating thinking into compassionate thinking. Transformation of our own inner dialogue paves the way for honesty and empathy.

Conceptually simple, though not simplistic, these four skills in three modes require significant practice, as they are antithetical to most of the ways we have

been socialized to understand ourselves and others. In short, NVC calls not merely for a new form of speech but for a new way of being in relationship to self and others. Thus NVC is not an end in and of itself; its *telos* is life-giving connection and understanding between individuals and groups.

NVC as a Humanizing Ecclesial Practice

Inspired by the resurgence in practical philosophy, the construction of multiple intelligence theory, and communitarian ethics, Christian educators have engaged in a widespread discussion of the formational significance of spiritual practices in recent years. Richard R. Osmer, the Mary W. Synnott Professor of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary, has identified a consensus definition of spiritual practices within this larger discussion. He suggests that spiritual practices are communal, tradition-bearing activities that generate knowledge and values intrinsic to themselves (Osmer, 1996, p. 29). Because many of those engaged in the practices discussion are concerned with public interfaith dialogue, this consensus definition does not align spiritual practices with any particular religious tradition.

Rosenberg understands NVC to be a fundamentally spiritual practice. He does not engage the practices discussion, but NVC nevertheless clearly fits the criteria of general spiritual practices as defined by Osmer. NVC is *communal*; it intends to foster life-enriching connection within persons, between persons, within communities, and between communities. It is most likely to contribute to our well-being when intentionally incorporated into communal discourse. NVC is *tradition-bearing*. It emerges from and is continuous with particular spiritual and psychological traditions. Rosenberg avoids aligning NVC with any particular religion out of his desire to encourage connection at the level of our common humanity and out of his recognition that religion often becomes a barrier to such connection. He does acknowledge, however, that the assumptions and goals of NVC have been significantly influenced by an eclectic group of spiritual and political leaders, including Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Walter Wink. The theology of nonviolence in the teachings of each of these leaders is distilled into concrete skills in NVC. NVC also bears the imprint of three schools of psychology. Like the object relations school, it understands relationality as the fundamental characteristic of human existence. Like cognitive psychology, it identifies internalized beliefs (often distorted perceptions of self and others) as one cause of emotional distress. Like humanistic psychology, NVC stresses empathic listening as central to emotional and spiritual healing. Finally, NVC *generates knowledge and values intrinsic to itself*. When practiced intentionally and regularly, it facilitates peace and harmony; fosters understanding of other institutions, groups, and persons; supports authentic dialogue among persons with religious differences; encourages intellectual humility; and helps persons stay self-connected enough to construct a coherent life narrative when they are bombarded with competing truths.

While NVC is clearly a spiritual practice, important questions remain: Is NVC compatible with the Christian faith? Can it become an ecclesial practice defined in a more confessional manner? Can NVC become a tradition-bearing, communal

activity that conforms participants to the likeness of Jesus Christ? The rest of this section answers these questions affirmatively through a dialogue with one aspect of theological anthropology.

The Basic Form of Humanity

One of the theological giants of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, reminds us that Jesus Christ is both the self-revelation of God to humanity and the revelation of humanity to humanity. Jesus Christ is the True Human. Self-giving love marks his life. Therefore to be human is to exist with and for others, though we are for one another in a qualitatively different sense than Jesus is for us. Put another way, the basic form of humanity, according to Barth, is “being-in-encounter.” The image of God within us is this relationality. Though our capacity to be in perfect communion with God, each other, and the rest of creation has been marred by sin, the image of God in humanity has not been completely eradicated. We continue to exist in encounter with each other. This encounter consists of mutual seeing, hearing, speaking, and assisting one another with gladness (Barth, 1960, pp. 222–285).

NVC’s understanding of human life resonates with this depiction of the nature of humanity. To be human, for Rosenberg, is to live in life-giving relationship to one another and our own selves; to bask in the joy of mutual giving and receiving, a giving and receiving that extends out beyond ourselves to ever-widening circles of community. Moreover, the four basic skills of NVC—observing without evaluating, stating feelings rather than thoughts, connecting feelings to needs, making requests—correspond to the four aspects of the *imago Dei*. In this sense, NVC offers a map for humane living.

Mutual Seeing through Observations

“**Mutual Seeing.**” To be human is to know and be known. It is to be open to God and others. We have the capacity to “look one another in the eye,” that is, to set aside our own preconceptions, biases, and prejudices and to consider the other as a fellow child of God. To look the other in the eye is possible only if the other can see us as well. To present a false self to others contradicts our determination to live in encounter. It is inhuman.

“**Observation.**” Nonviolent communication begins with observation, a skill that fosters mutual seeing. It involves the capacity to differentiate what we are hearing, seeing, and remembering from how we are evaluating what we are hearing, seeing, and remembering. Observations are concrete, in reference to a particular time, place, and event. Totalizing words like “never, always, whenever, everyone, no one” are absent from our observations of others and self. For example, the statement, “That pastor always preaches law and not grace; he’s legalistic,” is a twofold evaluation. To translate it into an observation, one might say, “In the past four sermons, I have heard the pastor warn us about being tempted to sin. I have not heard him speak about God’s grace or forgiveness.” It is important to note that the intent of making this observation would be to connect or to promote understanding. Without this motivation, even the most neutral observation can carry the energy and tone of judgment.

Observations also avoid moralistic judgments about others, if for no other reason than that doing so evokes defensiveness and creates disconnection. Rosenberg distinguishes moralistic judgments from value judgments; in fact, his own assessment of human nature is a value judgment. Whereas moralist judgments are static assessments of others or ourselves, value judgments identify whether or not particular actions are consonant with that which matters most to us. I would build upon Rosenberg by differentiating value judgments from ethical or moral judgments, which also are distinct from moralistic judgments. Value judgments are embedded in all of our actions. To put it differently, our practices are value laden. When our daily practices prove to be ineffective or are contested by competing practices (e.g., by alternative forms of marriage), then we engage in second-order reflection and interpretation about how to live with integrity. Ethical or moral judgments emerge from this intentional discernment. Christians make ethical judgments on the basis of their faith, discerning how best to live in a way that corresponds to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Mutual Speaking and Hearing Feelings and Needs

“Mutual Speech and Hearing.” Mutual seeing is not enough for true encounter. It sets the stage for knowing and being known but does not guarantee it. We must hear each other’s self-expression, and we must express ourselves. In hearing, we allow our presuppositions to be dismantled, our suspicions to be silenced. We invite the other to help us understand him or her, just as we help the other understand us.

Self-expression is active, not passive. It takes the form of “address,” that is, I reach out to the other with a question, a concern, an explanation that makes myself known. Self-expression does not wait to be noticed. It does not remain distant out of fear of rejection. Conversely, when addressed by another, we hear and speak. Being-in-encounter precludes any possibility of ignoring the other.

“Feelings” and “Needs.” The second and third NVC skills can be interpreted as practices of mutual speech and hearing. The capacity to identify, experience, and express feelings requires that we differentiate feelings from thoughts. Most of us use the word *feel* to express ideas, opinions, and evaluations. “I feel like telling that student that his assumptions are completely wrong” does not express a feeling. “I feel exasperated” does express a feeling. Sometimes we use the word *feel* to describe an evaluation of ourselves or others. “I feel inadequate as a teacher” is an evaluation. “I feel frustrated because I didn’t know how to explain the concept in a way that excites students” expresses a feeling and an observation.

The third NVC skill connects feelings with underlying needs. This skill is the hinge on which the whole process hangs. Human needs in NVC are universal qualities that contribute to human flourishing (e.g., health, play, freedom, interdependency, integrity, contribution, justice, peace, and meaning). A precondition for thriving is having our basic needs met. When our needs are being met, we experience what we often label as “positive” feelings: happy, inspired, elated, satisfied, energetic, relaxed. When our needs are not being met, we experience what we often label as “negative” feelings: angry, sad, disappointed, fearful, irritated.

According to NVC, all of our actions are attempts to meet needs, whether we are conscious of those needs or not. Even those actions that might be labeled as forms of self-denial are motivated by human needs. Choosing to care for another person might meet needs for meaning and purpose. Donating money to charity might meet needs for supporting wholeness and health for all people. Choosing to obey God might meet a need for integrity; in fact, if we follow Barth, the choice to obey is actually an exercise of our freedom to become who God has created us to be.

The capacity to connect with the needs that motivate our actions as well as the actions of others can contribute to humanizing relationships in a variety of ways. First, we can choose to act in ways that increase the chances of our needs and others' needs being met. Second, we can have compassion on ourselves and others when we understand all actions, particularly those that do more harm than good, as attempts to meet basic needs. Third, put together with the first two skills—observations and feelings—connecting with needs helps rid us of what Rosenberg calls “enemy images,” fixed identifications of other persons or groups as wrong, evil, or pathological. These entrenched diagnoses of others keep us from seeing their true humanity. Instead of labeling others with disdain, we can (1) state what we do not appreciate about another’s behavior (make an observation), (2) identify and express the feelings we experience in response to that behavior, and (3) connect with the basic need that is not being met for us. At the same time, we can empathize with the other person’s feelings and needs.¹ In this way, we enter into a dialogue marked by mutual seeing, speaking, and hearing.

Before moving on to the next skill, it is important to note that authentic connection and life-giving communication can occur at the level of intellectual discourse. Ideas can and do inspire. Rosenberg does not seem to appreciate or validate this level of communication. At times he draws too sharp a dichotomy between thinking and feeling in his reaction against the elevation of thought over emotion in Western philosophy and culture (2003b, pp. 93ff). Without accepting the reverse dichotomy that Rosenberg creates, we can acknowledge that even our beliefs and intellectual passions emerge from needs (e.g., for conceptual clarity, beauty, integrity, and contribution). Identifying and connecting with the feelings and needs embedded in our beliefs and others’ beliefs, rather than solely attempting to disprove one another, can help us to communicate our differences in respectful and humanizing ways.

Mutual Assisting through Requests

“**Mutual Assisting.**” As Jesus exists for others, so we, in correspondence to him, assist and request assistance from others. This reciprocity must be maintained, according to Barth (1960, p. 262), for assistance given but never received creates isolation. Self-sufficiency denies our basic humanity, for only God, who nevertheless has chosen to exist with and thus not to exist without humanity, is self-sufficient.

“**Requests.**” The fourth skill in NVC provides a concrete means for mutual assistance in respect of our inherent limitations. It involves expressing and receiving requests. Requests can be understood as strategies to meet needs. Nonviolent

requests fulfill three criteria: (1) They are not demands; the other person can say “no” without retribution. (2) They are stated in positive language; they avoid asking someone to refrain from a particular activity. (3) They are specific enough to be doable. For example, instead of asking a colleague to “work more closely together,” one could ask them to “spend an hour next Friday discussing common interests and devising plans for a potentially collaborative project.”

Requests are gifts. Rosenberg often says that nothing brings us greater joy in life than helping other people meet their needs while simultaneously allowing them to help meet ours. When we fail to make requests of others, we lose an opportunity not only for our own needs to be met but also for their needs to be met. In Barth’s language (1960, p. 263), we lose an opportunity to live in mutual assistance and thus in true encounter.

Of all the steps in NVC, making requests has the potential to unleash the most excitement and creativity. Conversely, it is also the step in NVC where people experience the most conflict. A strategy that meets one’s need for collaboration might not meet another’s need for autonomy. The needs themselves do not conflict, though strategies for meeting those needs might conflict and/or fail to meet those needs. In these instances, Rosenberg encourages us to release our strategies but never our needs. Denying needs diminishes life. As NVC trainers quip, “Hold your requests lightly and your needs tightly.”

Grateful and Free Connection

“**With Gladness.**” To be human is to see and be seen gladly, to speak and hear gladly, to assist and be assisted gladly. According to Barth, only in gratitude and freedom can our encounter with another be human. By definition, being-in-encounter cannot occur under compulsion. We cannot presume that another belongs to us, and they cannot perceive us as property. We are bound to each other only in freedom, mutuality, and joy.

“**With Playfulness.**” “Don’t do anything that isn’t play,” writes Rosenberg. Agree to a request only if you can do so “with the joy of young child feeding a hungry duck.” Freedom and pleasure should characterize and emerge from our decisions. Rosenberg points out that too often our actions emerge from a list of internal or external “should’s” or “have to’s.” We often acquiesce to others’ requests out of guilt, fear of retribution, or a sense of obligation. Living out of this negative energy depletes our joy, stifles gratitude, and inhibits connection to our own values and needs as well as those of others. Given Barth’s definition of true humanity, it also dehumanizes us and others. It contradicts our being-in-encounter.

Rosenberg does not suggest that we therefore simply refrain from all those grudgingly accepted tasks. Rather, he urges us to discern the needs being met or unmet by certain activities. This enables us to consider if our needs would be better served in other ways. It also enables us to engage gladly those activities that seem onerous. For instance, committee work may seem dreadful to professors. Yet we might acknowledge that our participation in these committees (or at least some of them) meets needs for stability, order, and contribution. Conversely, recognizing the needs that would be unmet as a consequence of our failure to

participate in committee meetings might help us to attend meetings without resentment. The key here is to connect to the life-giving quality of needs. When we do so, we are less likely to perceive ourselves as helpless; we are less likely to be overwhelmed with bitterness or socially induced guilt.

Overall, NVC fosters understanding and reconciliation when it is practiced with the intention to do so. Like any spiritual practice, without this intention it could turn into its opposite—a form of manipulation and coercion (Flack, 2006). With this intention, NVC provides concrete skills for becoming truly human (i.e., for conforming to the image of God in Jesus Christ).²

NVC as a Humanizing Educational Practice

NVC can be considered a humanizing practice in theological education in two regards: (1) it provides tools that enable seminary students to live in correspondence to Jesus Christ, the True Human, as they face a dizzying array of challenges in the personal, congregational, and public spheres of ministry; and (2) it challenges taken-for-granted educational processes that potentially contradict our basic form of humanity. To put it another way, teaching Nonviolent Communication and teaching *as* nonviolent communication contribute to formation for ministry in a dehumanizing world.

Applying NVC to Challenges in Ministry

In *Pastor as Person: Maintaining Personal Integrity in the Challenges and Choices of Ministry*, Gary Harbaugh (1984, p. 9) asserts, “Most difficulties pastors face in the parish arise when the pastor forgets that he or she is a person.” When clergy fail to treat themselves as fully human, their ability to fulfill their vocation suffers, as research on clergy health and well-being confirms (Episcopal Clergy Wellness, 2006; Halaas, 2002).

When integrated into seminary education, NVC, especially self-empathy, can prepare ministers to practice self-care. Self-empathy is a pathway for connecting to our needs at any given moment. This awareness enables us to make decisions to meet those needs. Therefore self-empathy can support ministers in stewarding their own calling by setting life-giving boundaries. When faced with decisions about how to allocate their time, ministers can identify the needs that will be met, for instance, by attending the Christian education committee, visiting a sick parishioner, or spending a quiet evening at home with their families. After identifying the needs, perhaps for order, compassion, and connection in various arenas of their life and ministry, they can dwell in them, connecting with the life-giving essence of each one. As a result of this inner contemplation, a need might emerge as the most pressing, giving one clarity and inner peace. Or a strategy might emerge that enables one to meet all of these needs in a way previously unknown. In either case, pastors could act with integrity by valuing all of those needs at play in the moment and by recognizing their own limitation to contribute to all of them. In this way, pastors can remember the qualitative distinction between themselves as fully human and Jesus Christ, the True Human who also is the True God and thus the liberator and healer of all.

Second, self-empathy provides a tool for helping ministers respond to one of the most painful experiences of ministry: criticism from both congregants and self. Psychological testing suggests that pastors are highly susceptible to both blame and praise. Pastors tend to be people-pleasers, to some degree. They have strong needs for affirmation on the one hand and for contribution to the well-being of others' lives on the other. Frequent criticism from a variety of sources can stimulate feelings of disappointment, depletion, even depression. Often these feelings are exacerbated by a fierce inner critic that barrages the pastor with a laundry list of "should's" (e.g., you should have spent more preparing that sermon; you should have prayed more; you should have been more compassionate, etc.). Self-empathy helps pastors differentiate these evaluations from what actually occurs in their interactions with others. It helps them identify their own needs for competence, appreciation, and understanding. They may mourn that these needs have been unmet in particular interactions with congregants. They may choose to honestly express these needs to another person. They may discover a strategy for meeting these needs. In each of these possibilities, they would avoid the self-flagellation that keeps them disconnected from God and themselves. Self-empathy coupled with honest expression trains pastors to see and respond to themselves as human, and in so doing, it provides the foundation for seeing others as made in the image of God. For self-perception and perception of others are deeply intertwined.

In nearly every sphere of ministry—interpersonal, congregational, denominational, and public—pastors today are called upon to stay in dialogue with those who are different from themselves. An influential elder may disagree with the pastor's plan for changing worship practices. Different ministry programs may vie for the power to direct the church's vision. Denominational factions may harden around diverse theological perspectives. Interfaith social justice efforts may falter in light of misunderstanding and prejudice. The NVC skill set, sometimes called "staying in the dialogue" (Gonzalez, 2006), can help ministers stay true to themselves while remaining open to the other in such situations.

Staying in the dialogue involves the ability to empathize with another person or group while also expressing oneself honestly and authentically. In this approach, pastors track the ebb and flow of the conversation. First they empathize with the person(s) with whom they disagree. They reflect back the feelings and needs of the other person until that person has the experience of being fully understood. Then they express their own feelings and needs. They make connecting requests, asking the other person what they have heard or how they feel in response to what has been shared. Such connecting requests are crucial to deepening understanding and sustaining the dialogue.

Staying in the dialogue also requires the ability to translate moralistic judgments and evaluations of self and others into feelings and needs so that the connections with self and other can be maintained. If the other says, "You never listen to me," the pastor might respond by saying, "So you'd really like me to take the time to understand you fully." If pastors find themselves thinking, "What an egocentric idiot; all I do is listen to people," then they might notice their own needs for acknowledgment and appreciation.

Finally, staying in the dialogue requires nonattachment to a specific outcome. In working across differences, the intention is for connection, understanding, and valuing the needs of both people/groups equally. Rosenberg (2005, p. 2) writes, “To practice this process of conflict resolution, we must completely abandon the goal of *getting people to do what we want*. Instead, we focus on creating the conditions whereby *everyone’s needs will be met*” (emphasis in original). Thus, prior to the dialogue pastors practice enough self-empathy to be clear about their needs, including their need for community.

Humanizing Our Educational Practices

The values that undergird Nonviolent Communication and Barth’s understanding of the *imago Dei* pose tough questions to traditional teaching practices. Is it a demand to require that passing a course be contingent upon satisfactory fulfillment of certain predetermined assignments? Are preset lectures attentive to the needs of students as they arrive in the classroom? Does grading squelch playfulness? How can students learn to communicate and relate with others in peaceful ways if the institutions in which they learn fail to do so?

While full exploration of these questions goes beyond the bounds of this article, I will note a few ways that such questions have reshaped my own seminary course design and pedagogy. (1) Before a course begins, I e-mail the syllabus to students. I share my desire to contribute to their meaningful learning, and then I request that they review the syllabus prior to our first class. I ask them if the syllabus meets their needs for learning, and if not, what specifically they would like to change. Essentially, I am honestly expressing my needs and then making a connecting request. In return, I encourage them to clarify their needs and to make a request on the basis of those needs. In numerous instances, I have been able to incorporate students’ requests into the course outline while still maintaining the integrity of the course, which is also one of my needs.

(2) In classes that have a small-group component, I model and encourage check-in and process observation. At the beginning of the small group, each class member shares an observation, feeling, and need. This connects students at the level of their common humanity. One student volunteers to serve as the process observer, noting flow of conversation, use of humor, levels of participation, etc. During the last ten minutes of the small group, this person shares his or her observations of group process. I coach them to change evaluations, such as “Tom seemed uninterested,” to concrete observations. Then other group members respond to the observations, perhaps sharing their own feelings and needs in relationship to choices they made during the group.

(3) I encourage a focus on learning instead of earning grades in two ways. When the curriculum allows, I encourage students to take courses on a pass/fail basis if they tend to become anxious and overly focused on their grades. I attempt to utilize basic NVC skills in my written feedback on student assignments. I avoid judgment-oriented feedback in favor of naming what I appreciate in the student’s work and how it contributes to the learning integral to the course. Instead of writing, “Excellent point,” I might write, “I appreciate the way you draw upon this author to construct your own pastoral care plan. This integration of psychology

and theology into your personal life is what this course aims for. I hope that it will serve you well as you seek to balance the various facets of pastoral ministry.”

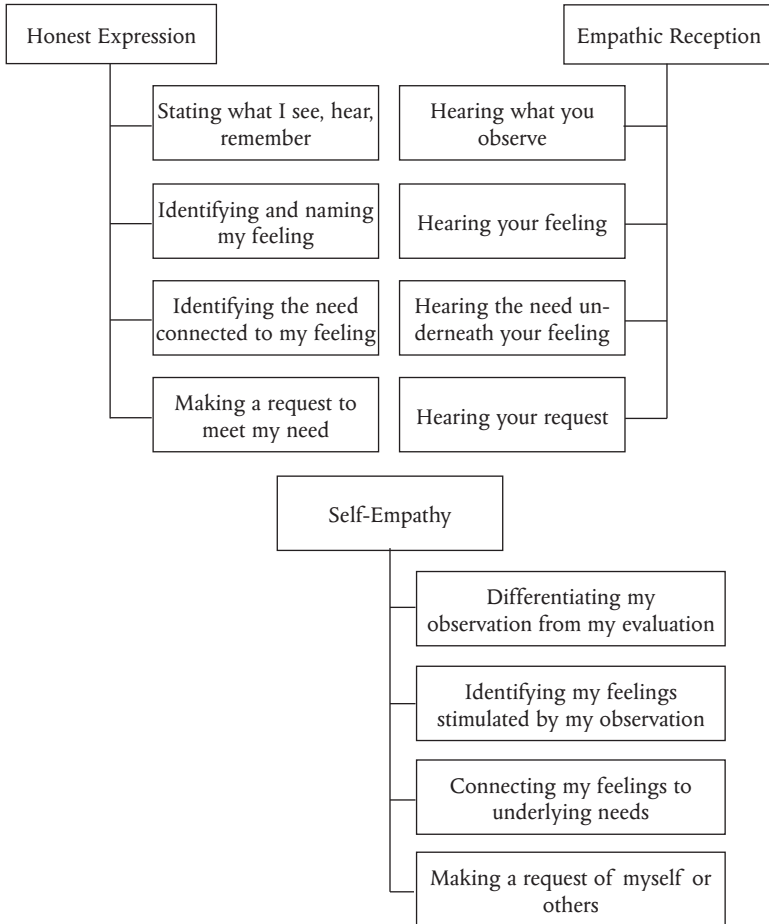
(4) I encourage students throughout the semester to pay attention to their questions, concerns, and thoughts related to the course. Periodically I will ask students, “What’s alive in you right now in this course?” I try to build into the course design opportunities for students to pursue their own interests related to the course material. Sometimes I give students a wide variety of possible journal assignments and encourage them to complete those that most closely resonate with their interests. In elective courses, I structure final projects loosely so as to allow students to meet their needs for meaningful learning.

(5) In my courses focused on learning the skills of Nonviolent Communication, we utilize real-life issues as they arise in the class rather than depending upon role plays and case studies transported into the class from other times and places. During the second week of one class, a student shared that he was tempted to throw out our main theological text because he perceived the author to be a heretic and therefore dangerous to his own learning and formation. I was flummoxed. Having read this theologian thoroughly, I am convinced that his theology is fully orthodox. I also was annoyed, because I value learning even from those with whom I disagree, including so-called heretics. As a professor, I had at least two options: exegete the text to demonstrate the orthodoxy of the author’s perspective; or, empathize with the student’s feelings and needs, naming his anxiety, frustration, disappointment, and his longing for theological integrity and trust in his professor’s judgment. In order to take full advantage of this teaching moment, I shared with students my own internal dilemma. Then I chose the latter option. The student did not change his evaluation of the course text, but he did stay engaged in the class. He continued to participate fully in discussions and exercises. He continued to share his own opinion when it diverged significantly from that of the whole group, thus giving the class an opportunity to live in encounter with each other. Moreover, other students commented that a variety of their needs were met in the process: needs for learning, trust (particularly in my commitment to connecting with them at the level of our common humanity), and inspiration. That interaction sparked their hope for living compassionately.

Concluding Remarks

Nonviolent Communication can be understood as a humanizing ecclesial and educational practice. It challenges our enemy images of other people and provides a concrete way of transforming those images. It fosters openness to others in the midst of misunderstanding and conflict. When taught in a seminary curriculum, NVC can help future ministers live as persons made in the image of God. When brought to bear on seminary pedagogy, it can help professors to model compassionate discourse in hopes that our personal and corporate existence might witness to Jesus Christ, the True Human.

The Three Modes and Four Basic Skills in NVC



Notes

- 1 Some situations, especially those in which a person's basic well-being is at risk, require what Rosenberg calls "the protective use of force," direct intervention intended to contribute to wholeness, healing, and safety (2003b, chap. 11).
- 2 Those who read Rosenberg also will discover a significant tension between his assessment of human nature as essentially compassionate and the scriptural assessment that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23 RSV). While full treatment of this apparent conflict lies outside the bounds of this article, the following guidelines may assist those who want to relate NVC to a Reformed

understanding of sin. (1) In the New Testament, sin refers to the human proclivity to live in contradiction to our own humanity. It refers to our choosing against connection to God and others and thus against that which brings us life, love, peace, and wholeness. In other words, sin is an aberration of human nature. (2) Sin language, in most of the New Testament, does not convey a moralistic judgment. It is not used by Jesus or the New Testament writers to create two classes of people, those who are sinners and those who are saints. Each of us is simultaneously sinner and saint, *simul justus et peccator*. We have the capacity to choose that which contributes to God's reign of peace or that which contradicts God's reign. The fact that we so often choose the latter, even when we long to live differently, signals the depth of our estrangement from God's intention for our lives. (3) Sin does not eradicate the goodness of humanity. It does not ultimately define us, for God in Jesus Christ has destroyed sin and its effects (Latini, 2007; Hunsinger & Latini, unpublished).

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