

## Public communication in forestry: A focus on church property owners and entities in the Czech Republic

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**Abstract:** This study evaluates the approach to public communication within economic entities managing ecclesiastical forest properties. Following the extensive property restitutions in the Czech Republic after 2012, forests owned by the church and religious societies now account for more than 5% of the country's total forest area. The communication practices of these entities were assessed through a questionnaire survey of 221 respondents (comprising forest visitors as part of a general sample), nine in-depth interviews with employees, and, in addition, a detailed analysis of communication methods used by five selected forestry subjects. The results indicate that the general public does not expect a specialised communication approach despite the ecclesiastical nature of the property. Furthermore, foresters themselves do not perceive the need for a specific philosophy or approach based on church principles in their professional activities. No specialised communication strategies exist for church-owned forest properties, and employees are neither familiar with nor utilise Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si'*.

**Keywords:** communication strategy; ecclesiastical forestry; *Laudato si'*; property restitution; public perception; stakeholders

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Advancing climate change is taking its toll on managed landscapes, most visibly in recent years in commercial forests troubled by drought and bark beetle calamities (MoA 2023; Remeš et al. 2020). This places great demands on forestry, not only regarding forest cultivation methods (Remeš et al. 2011) but also in communicating these methods to the public to ensure society understands the functions and management of production forests (Fabra-Crespo, Rojas-Briales 2015; Lähtinen et al. 2017). Forestry plays an increasing role in discussions on adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change (Verkerk et al. 2022; Psistaki et al. 2024).

Public expectations of the forestry sector are high (Williamson et al. 2019). Understanding public attitudes and values can facilitate the resolution of potential conflicts (Mola-Yudego 2022; Li, Toppinen 2011; Söderberg, Eckerberg 2013; Sotirov, Winkel 2016; Nousiainen, Mola-Yudego 2022; Mack et al. 2023), the preparation of political instruments, the creation of communication strategies, and the implementation of political goals. Given the crucial role of forests in mitigating climate change and providing ecosystem services (Verkerk et al. 2022), communication focuses on raising awareness of sustainable forest management. Effective communication is essential for motivating the public to adopt climate adaptation measures and change behaviour regarding forest management (Hermanowicz et al. 2024). Successful strategies can thus significantly contribute to sustainable management and biodiversity conservation (Blennow, Persson 2009).

Communication is a vital tool for maintaining the legitimacy and acceptability of the sector's activities. According to Scott (1998), organisational legitimacy is negotiated between society and decision-makers. Sustainability – comprising ecological, economic, and social domains – is a key element in forestry. Maintaining legitimacy depends heavily on how sustainability is perceived throughout the production chain and by the general public (Korhonen et al. 2015).

The business sector faces increasing external pressure, as the interests of consumers and stakeholders often diverge from organisational communication (Halme, Kallio 2011). The transformation of forestry from a resource-intensive to a sustainable, knowledge-intensive sector within the European bioeconomy (Kleinschmit et al. 2014) requires appropriate communication strategies (Korhonen

et al. 2015). However, the perceived contribution of the sector to sustainability depends on establishing dialogues with all stakeholders to align with societal needs and value expectations. This remains a challenging task; Lähtinen et al. (2017) note that while literature agrees on the importance of stakeholder communication, specific guidance on building the sector's image is lacking. A 2015 analysis (Korhonen et al. 2015) revealed a lack of consistent, cross-border communication strategies in Europe. Topics such as wood-based innovation and ecosystem services receive less coverage, leading to low awareness. Notably, active discussion on an EU Forest Strategy about communication began in 2011 (United Nations 2011).

This initiated a period of active strategy development. Fabra-Crespo and Rojas-Briales (2015) conducted a comparative analysis of European forest owners' associations. Recreational functions, for instance, are increasingly included as determinants in multifunctional management (Rolfe, Windle 2015). The European Commission also publishes guidelines for communicating specific forestry issues. The EU Forest Strategy for 2030 aims to enhance media presence and provide communication tools for partners (European Commission 2021).

Equally important are strategies for extreme disaster situations, which help build a comprehensive image of forestry for both professionals and the public (Löwe et al. 2021). In 2024, IUFRO published the Communicating Forest Science Manual (Hermanowicz et al. 2024), and the European Commission presented a Strategic Framework for International Cooperation (EU Regulation No. 2023/1115). Riedl (2025) offered a comprehensive view of forestry communication in the Czech Republic using models such as CIMO (Denyer et al. 2008), problem tree analysis (Cirucci et al. 2021), and SWOT analysis, though these do not prescribe specific communication techniques. Forest ownership structures are determined by historical and cultural contexts. A key question is whether society expects different communication models from private, state, or ecclesiastical (church) owners.

The ownership structure of forests is determined by the historical and cultural context and the development of the entire state. The question is whether society expects a different model of communication from private forest owners or state, i.e. public and non-public forest owners. Then there are also forests of religious societies,

which behave as private economic entities, but these are non-public forests.

Within the framework of the historical and cultural development of Central Europe, the population in the Czech Republic has significantly changed its attitude towards religion. Historically, the situation before World War II had the greatest influence. Within Czechoslovakia, the communists came to power, and after 1948, the church was generally suppressed, which resulted in the loss of more than half of the church members. In 1991, a total of 40% of the population had no religion, in 2001, 51% had no religion, and in 2011, only 14% stated their religion (Hamplová, Nešpor 2009). In 2021, 18.7% of those who answered the question declared religious faith. Meanwhile, between 2001 and 2011, the Roman Catholic Church lost over 1.5 million members. However, in 2012, the Christian Democratic Party, as a political movement, took over the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic, where forestry belongs, and pushed through church restitution. Currently, church forests in the Czech Republic account for more than 5% of forests in terms of ownership structure.

This paper examines church-owned forests, analysing their communication approaches. Specifically, it investigates how these entities communicate their stewardship of church property – which may be perceived through various societal lenses – and whether a formal communication framework exists. Finally, the study seeks to verify or refute the hypothesis that society expects a distinct communication style for ecclesiastical forest management.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

**Forests owned by church and other religious entities as study areas.** The Czech Republic was established on 1 January 1993 following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia (1918–1992). Throughout its socio-cultural and historical development, the

territory was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918, after which it formed Czechoslovakia together with Slovakia. During World War II, the territory existed as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939–1945) under German administration, returning to the Czechoslovak state from 1945 until 1993.

Forests in the Czech Republic cover approximately 35% of the country's area, representing around 2.7 million hectares. The most common tree species include Norway spruce (45%), Scots pine (16.5%), European beech (10%), oak (8%), and larch (4%). Coniferous species currently account for 30%, while deciduous species represent 70%. In terms of ownership structure, public forests (state and municipal) account for 70.8%, while non-public forests comprise 29.2%.

Churches and religious societies in the Czech Republic may be registered under Act No. 3/2002 Coll., which grants them the status of special-type legal entities under state law. Although ecclesiastical forests historically existed in the territory, they were nationalised during the communist era. From 1950 (specifically after 1947) until the restitution, the share of church-owned forests was 0%, despite having represented approximately 7% of the forest area between 1880 and 1947 (Jarský et al. 2015).

The restitution process began in 1991 with Act No. 229/1991 Coll., though it did not focus extensively on church property. In 2012, Act No. 428/2012 Coll. on Property Settlement with Churches and Religious Societies was enacted specifically for the Czech Republic. Based on this Act, property settlements have been ongoing, and since 2013, there has been a recorded increase in forests owned by religious entities. The overall development up to 2024 is detailed in Table 1.

Most forest assets were returned from the holdings of the largest state-owned enterprise, Lesy České republiky, s.p. (Forests of the Czech Republic), which has restituted more than 140 000 ha of forest since 2013. The largest recipient is the Roman Catholic Church, specifically its individual

Table 1. Development of the area of forests owned by the church and other religious entities in ha and % of the total forest cover of the Czech Republic

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
ha	1 502	1 621	22 771	52 475	86 682	113 806	130 639	139 119	139 001	120 856	141 526	142 444
%	0.06	0.06	0.87	2.01	3.32	4.36	5.00	5.32	5.31	4.62	5.41	5.44

Source: MoA 2013–2025

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parishes, orders, and archbishoprics. These returned forests are managed by the churches either directly – such as by Bishopric Forests of Ostrava-Opava (approx. 25 000 ha) – or through private legal entities, such as Archepiscopal Forests and Estates of Olomouc, Ltd. (approx. 42 000 ha) or the Forests of the Archbishopric of Prague (AP Forestry, Ltd.), which manages more than 14 000 ha. Currently, forests owned by ecclesiastical and other religious entities rank among the largest privately managed forest holdings in the Czech Republic.

**Data sampling and methodology.** To determine the current state of public communication regarding ecclesiastical forest properties, a four-step approach was adopted, as detailed below.

**Questionnaire survey.** A questionnaire survey was conducted among forest visitors during various events hosted by the church-owned economic entities. The survey took place directly in the forests over five days between May 2025 and November 2025. Respondents provided their gender and age category, with age options limited to 'younger,' 'middle-aged,' 'older,' and 'prefer not to say.' A total of 221 respondents participated. Table 2 presents the specific dates of data collection and the number of surveyed individuals. The survey consisted of the following three questions:

- (1) Are you aware that you are currently on church-owned property? (Answers: Yes/No)
- (2) Based on the presentation of this company (or the site itself), do you perceive that it is church property? (Answers: Yes/No/Prefer not to say)
- (3) Do you expect a different communication approach for church property compared to, for example, state or municipal forests? (Answers: Yes/No)

Data evaluation was performed using Microsoft Excel (Version 2024), with results presented in tables and graphs. Specific dates, respondent counts,

and the economic entities whose properties were surveyed are listed in Table 2.

By applying simple statistical tests, a concrete chi-square test was used to check if there are significant differences in communication expectations based on the gender of respondents.

**Assessment of communication methods.** The communication methods of five selected economic entities managing ecclesiastical forests were investigated. The executives or directors responsible for forest management and administration were contacted by telephone and asked to describe their public communication practices. The inquiry focused on:

- (i) The use of official websites and social media platforms for public engagement.
- (ii) The number of personnel directly responsible for media and public relations.
- (iii) The existence of a defined and documented public communication strategy.

The results of this investigation are presented in Table 3.

**Review of public information and internal frameworks.** A survey of publicly available information sources was conducted to determine how church entities managing forests address public communication. This step focused on the organisational relationship between these entities and the church, and whether there are specific documents, internal procedures, or recommendations upon which these subjects rely when communicating forestry-related issues.

**In-depth interviews.** As a supplementary measure, nine anonymised in-depth interviews were conducted with employees of a selected economic entity managing church forest property. These interviews took place in 2024 and 2025. Respondents were asked the following question: *'Do you believe the company follows a specific Christian philosophy in its approach to forestry, and is this reflected in its management practices and communication with the public?'*

Table 2. Date of research and number of respondents according to the economic entities surveyed

Date of research	Number of respondents	Name of the economic subject
23.05.2025	50	Archepiscopal Forests and Estates of Olomouc, Ltd.
18.05.2025	43	Archepiscopal Forests and Estates of Olomouc, Ltd.
08.07.2025	72	Bishopric Forests of Ostrava-Opava, Hukvaldy Game Reserve
23.08.2025	33	Bishopric Forests of Ostrava-Opava, Hukvaldy Game Reserve
22.11.2025	23	AP Forestry, Ltd. – Forests of the Archbishopric of Prague

Table 3. Basic overview of communication methods with an emphasis on social media

Name of the economic subject	Approximate area of forests	It operates independently as a private entity – separate from the church	Social media communication	Frequency (how often)	Number of persons designated (responsible) for communication
Archepiscopal Forests and Estates of Olomouc, Ltd.	42 000	yes	Facebook, Instagram	weekly	2
Bishopric Forests of Ostrava-Opava	24 000	partly	Facebook, Instagram	monthly	0
AP Forestry, Ltd. – Forests of the Archbishopric of Prague	27 000	yes	not available	not available	0
Metropolitan Chapter of St. Wenceslas in Olomouc	3 000	partly	Facebook	monthly	0
Forestry Department of the Bishopric of Brno	1 500	no	Facebook, Instagram	not available	0

## RESULTS

### Questionnaire survey among forest visitors.

A total of 221 respondents participated in the survey, consisting of 68% women and 32% men. In terms of age distribution, the majority (57%) were middle-aged, followed by older individuals (21%) and younger participants (5%); the remaining 17% declined to state their age.

Figure 1 illustrates whether visitors were aware that the forest they were visiting was church property. The results show that while nearly 70% of respondents were aware of the ecclesiastical ownership, a significant portion (30%) remained uninformed.

The results indicate that while most visitors are aware of being on church property, approximately 30% do not register this fact. Figure 2 presents the responses to whether visitors perceive any specific indicators – such as the company's presentation, communication style, organised events, or general approach – that identify the land as ecclesiastical property. The findings reveal that a majority of respondents do not perceive any distinct characteristics in communication or management that would differentiate it as church property.

Nearly 75% of respondents stated that they did not perceive, based on the company's presentation or the property itself, that it was church-owned. In contrast, approximately 22% of respondents did perceive this in some way, while the remaining 3% declined to answer.

Figure 3 illustrates the responses regarding whether visitors expect a different communication approach for church property compared to, for example, state or municipal forests.

The results demonstrate that a significant majority of respondents (77.4%) do not expect a different communication approach from church-owned entities. In contrast, 22.6% of respondents do have such expectations.

In terms of the significance of gender, no statistically significant dependence was found for any answer [Question 1 (Figure 1):  $\chi^2 = 0.88$ ,  $P$ -value = 0.3462; Question 2 (Figure 2):  $\chi^2 = 2.53$ ,  $P$ -value = 0.1115; Question 3 (Figure 3):  $\chi^2 = 3.76$ ,  $P$ -value=0.0523]. It means that gender would have no influence on the opinion regarding church forests.

**Communication methods among selected economic entities.** The investigation into the communication practices of five selected ecclesiastical

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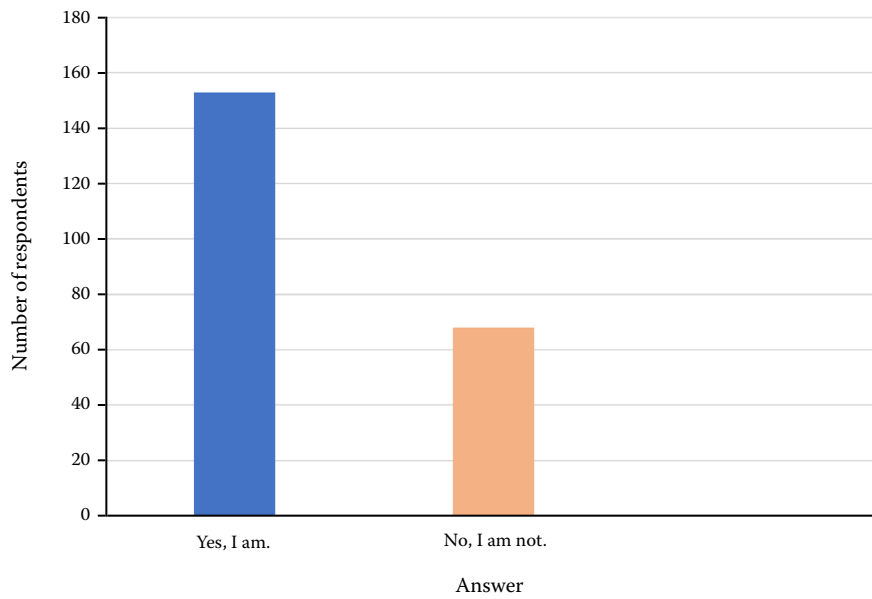


Figure 1. Results showing answers to the question: 'Are you aware that you are currently on church-owned property?'

entities yielded the comparative results presented in Table 3. Below is a fundamental overview, with a particular focus on the utilisation of social media and the human resources dedicated to public relations.

Table 3 reveals that only one out of the five entities has appointed personnel dedicated to communication at a professional level. In the remaining entities, there is no strictly defined responsibility for public communication.

A more detailed investigation into who oversees these activities allowed for the characterisation of the analysed economic entities, as shown in Table 4.

The results in Table 4 demonstrate that only one entity approaches communication systematically. In other cases, such as the Bishopric Forests of Ostrava-Opava and AP Forestry, Ltd., public communication appears to be handled implicitly, with the methods and execution left entirely to the discre-

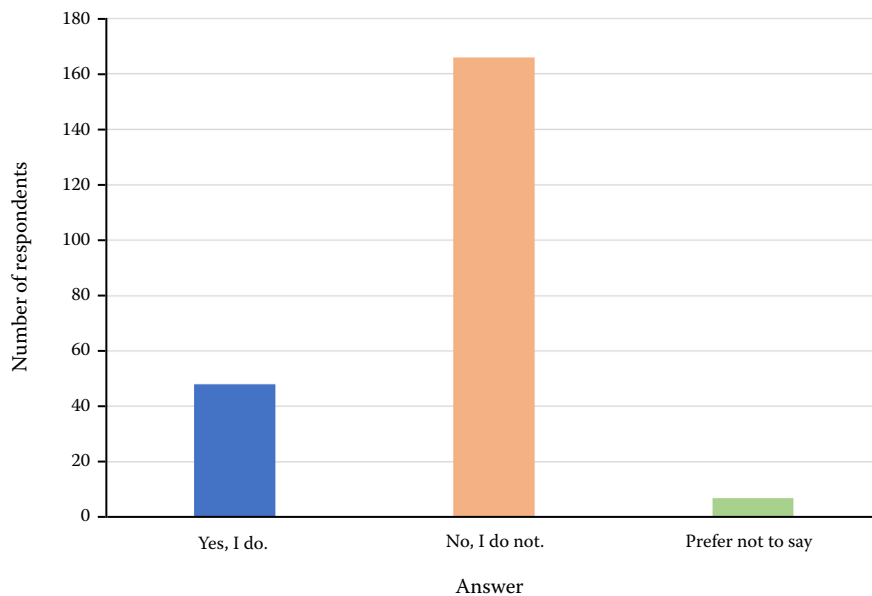


Figure 2. Results showing answers to the question: 'Based on the presentation of this company (or the site itself), do you perceive that it is church property?'

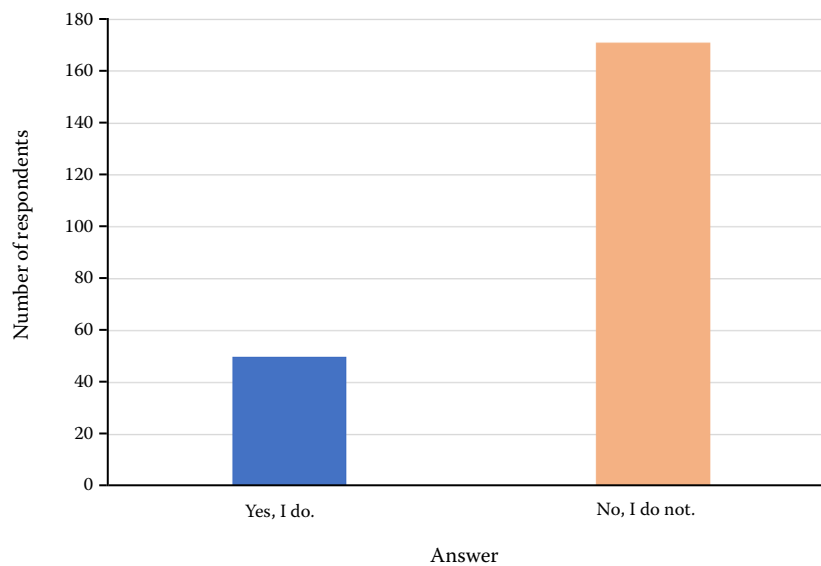


Figure 3. Results showing answers to the question: 'Do you expect a different communication approach for church property compared to, for example, state or municipal forests?'

tion of individual foresters. Consequently, there is no formal strategy governing these activities.

Another entity provides only contact information for its forestry staff, stating that all forest-related inquiries should be directed to them. This subject organises no public events. Similarly, the remaining two entities acknowledge their forest holdings only by listing staff contacts; communi-

cation is not addressed strategically, and no public events are held.

**Public communication by ecclesiastical forestry entities based on external findings.** Following the emergence of entities managing church-owned forest ecosystems after 2013, these subjects began to organise formally. In 2016, they joined the largest association of forest owners in the Czech

Table 4. Methods of communication with the public in the compared subjects

Name of the economic subject	Short description of communication with the public
Archepiscopal Forests and Estates of Olomouc, Ltd.	Have their own social media and public relations department, publish their own magazine for employees (published twice a year); numerous events for the public are organised annually (large and small events); preparation of their own communication strategy and their own vision has been set. Partial training of professional forestry personnel in the field of public communication. Very active communication in the social media.
Bishopric Forests of Ostrava-Opava AP Forestry, Ltd. – Forests of the Archbishopric of Prague	Only websites are available; it is unclear with whom to communicate within the media – this role is partly fulfilled by people in managerial positions (director, vice director). A limited number of public events annually. The necessity of communication with the public starts to be considered.
Metropolitan Chapter of St. Wenceslas in Olomouc	Although the company owns the forests, it provides no information about them, except for hunting and game management. Only maps and contact information of professional forestry workers are provided. Communication with the public has not been considered yet.
Forestry Department of the Bishopric of Brno	It is not clearly stated whether the company owns the forest land, how many hectares it covers, or how the property is managed. Only the contact details of foresters are provided as the representatives. No further information. Ways of communicating with the public have not been considered yet.

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Republic: SVOL (the Association of Municipal, Private, and Church Forest Owners). Since 2019, these entities have been affiliated with the officially established SVOL – Chamber of Church Forests, a registered association (z.s.). The Chamber organises annual meetings and represents nearly all owners or managers of ecclesiastical forests in the Czech Republic.

Through this institution, these entities communicate with the public – specifically state authorities and the government – concerning legislative amendments and media relations. However, this platform does not facilitate direct communication during the execution of daily forestry activities. According to its statutes (SVOL 2019), the Chamber's objectives focus on assisting members with administrative and management issues and defending their legitimate interests. There is no explicit mention of methods for public communication; thus, the Chamber serves primarily as an institute for internal communication among members rather than an external outreach tool.

From the perspective of ownership origin, ecclesiastical forestry communication may also draw on recommendations from church leadership, notably the Papacy. In the 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis addressed the 'care of our common home'. He advocated for supporting small-scale farmers and criticised predatory relationships with 'Sister Mother Earth,' consumerism, and an economy focused solely on growth and profit. He formulated a duty for Christians to act not merely as stewards of nature but to care for it in a 'fraternal spirit,' responding to its 'cry' and 'lament.'

As noted by Spalová et al. (2023), the Pope emphasised ethical finance, self-help cooperatives, and the precautionary principle. This papal appeal has supported efforts by some Catholics to manage returned lands more sustainably. By becoming a significant actor in the landscape, the Catholic Church has the opportunity to exert considerable influence. However, Molika and Pérez-Garrido (2022) remain critical of the encyclical's practical application. Their analysis of the literature regarding the incentives and communication strategies derived from *Laudato si'* found no specific comparison related to forestry. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that the encyclical encourages a policy of deepening responsibility regarding socio-environmental aspects.

**Findings from in-depth interviews.** In response to the question: '*Do you think the company follows a specific Christian philosophy in its approach to forestry, and is this reflected in its management or public communication?*', all nine respondents stated that they did not feel that Christianity or the fact of ecclesiastical ownership influenced the philosophical care of forest ecosystems. Instead, they adhered to the principle of 'due diligence' (the care of a proper manager), which they considered identical to Christian philosophy. This perspective was dominant among all interviewees.

Regarding internal communication, employees participate in events associated with church holidays or celebrations. While these events are typically mandatory, they do not include instructions on public communication. Furthermore, respondents noted that meetings between employees and church officials, which were frequent in the past, occur less often now.

Almost all respondents were unaware of any internal documents regarding public communication. Opinions on communication guidelines varied: more than half claimed no such document exists, pointing to insufficient representation of the entity in public and a lack of official stances on various issues. A minority suggested such procedures might exist but were unfamiliar with them or could not recall the details. Some respondents noted that they avoid general public contact, limiting their communication to municipal representatives or professional stakeholders (e.g. contractors for cultivation and harvesting). All respondents stated they would welcome a formal document or clearer instructions regarding public engagement.

Significantly, when asked about Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'*, not a single respondent was familiar with it; most had heard of its existence for the first time during the interview.

The nature of the responses is best captured by the following (edited) quote from one respondent:

*'...we meet with church representatives officially and unofficially... mostly at Christmas parties or celebrations. [The representative] knows everyone by name, knows where they live and how many children they have... there is a genuine interest in the employees as individuals. However, I believe every company should manage its business with the care of a proper manager. Christianity is not imposed on management, though emphasis is placed on church holidays like Easter or the Feast of Cyr-*

*il and Methodius. We ensure the grounds are tidy as a 'business card' for the company. People walking by know it is church property, so it is necessary to represent the company responsibly – not driving a dirty car, wearing the service uniform, and being clean and well-groomed.'*

## DISCUSSION

Communication is a linear process involving five elements: the communicator, message, medium, audience, and effect. Based on this, the communication process can be described by identifying the sender, message content, communication channel, recipient, and the resulting impact. We distinguish between one-way and two-way (symmetrical and asymmetrical) communication (Lasswell 1948).

Various communication strategies exist within the forestry sector. A common feature of these strategies is the effort to convey key information regarding the importance of forests and sustainable management practices. Most are based on the fundamental principles of engagement with the public and stakeholders – groups that both influence and are influenced by the organisation (Freeman 1984). Strategic stakeholder management, whether proactive or reactive, involves three primary tasks (Smudde, Courtright 2011): identifying key audiences, determining topics of importance to them, and selecting appropriate communication methods, while simultaneously maintaining and improving relationships.

The general public represents a significant group of secondary stakeholders that shapes the overall opinion on the social acceptability of forestry activities (Lähtinen et al. 2017). Decisions regarding forests involve long-term horizons and diverse stakeholders, requiring extensive information from various sources. Analysing public attitudes and stakeholder interests is therefore a prerequisite for developing communication strategies with adequate social support (Lähtinen et al. 2017; Riedl et al. 2019).

Historically, the forestry sector has focused mainly on one-way reactive communication, which is effective for short-term awareness but limited in scope. It has traditionally transmitted messages outward from the forestry community rather than engaging in a two-way exchange focused on persuasion – a method proven crucial for long-term sustainability (Lähtinen et al. 2017; Wilkes-Allemand

et al. 2021). This situation is evident in the Czech Republic, where the forestry community remains relatively closed, showing a low willingness to communicate with external groups. This is characterised by a predominance of 'bonding social capital,' which maintains intra-group cohesion but limits engagement with other social groups. According to foresters, the public tends to idealise forests, often failing to perceive them through the lenses of economics and ownership (Stachová 2021).

The demand for enhanced communication between the forestry sector and society is also driven by the 'moralisation of markets' and 'Corporate Social Responsibility' (CSR), which emphasise the responsible treatment of both people and landscapes (Li, Toppinen 2011). It is assumed that this moralisation further supports neoliberal governance and visions of responsible social behaviour (Shamir 2008). In this regard, the concept of the bioeconomy plays a significant role, promoting the sustainable and holistic use of natural resources – including non-timber products – with respect for all stakeholders and local conditions (Ladu et al. 2020). The diversity of forest owners in Europe, with millions of private entities, can significantly strengthen the economic viability of rural bioeconomies (Huber et al. 2023).

At the same time, forest owners are encouraged to operate within a market-based framework while simultaneously protecting social and ecological values. Responsibility for the full spectrum of forest values is largely placed on private owners, implying the subjective position of a 'responsible forest owner' – an autonomous actor capable of making informed decisions (Soneryd, Uggla 2015). Research on small-scale European forest owners shows that most associate management with multifunctionality. However, while Western European owners prioritise an ecosystem-oriented approach, those from Eastern Europe tend to focus on economic aspects and forest maintenance. This divergence may be linked to the socio-political dynamics of Europe and shifting values in postmodern society. Forestry communication strategies must reflect these differing paradigms (Feliciano et al. 2017).

However, regarding ecclesiastical forest owners, economic demands are often even more pronounced. There is a visible effort to demonstrate stewardship through 'proper management,' which often results in public communication being side-

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lined. This represents a missing sociological dimension in current forestry practice.

As in other countries, the Czech Republic is witnessing a fundamental shift in how forests are perceived. Although the public still expects forests to maintain their productive function, environmental functions are seen as increasingly vital. The public prefers nature-based management and views certain aspects of traditional forestry negatively. From an environmental sociology perspective, groups emphasising the urgency of ecological issues have been successful in shaping public discourse (Abrams et al. 2005; Stachová 2018). The lay public considers the preservation of non-productive functions – such as climate, water, soil, and biodiversity protection – to be essential, while also highly valuing the psychosocial and spiritual benefits of forests (Stachová, Čermák 2023). Most Czechs exhibit biocentric attitudes and express high interest in the state of the landscape (Krajhanzl et al. 2018). While television remains the primary information source for the general population, younger and more educated individuals increasingly rely on social media. These results confirm a strong public bond with forests but a less positive relationship with forestry as a socio-economic sector. Generally, the Central European public appears to hold more negative associations with forestry than people in other regions (Reidl et al. 2019).

According to Lišková (2009), the vision of strategic public communication is not fully embraced by all forest managers. This is further reflected at the university level, where forestry education does not yet address this issue sufficiently.

More than a decade after church restitutions, the question of whether ecclesiastical entities have established specific communication methods based on Christian philosophy remains. The identified lack of preparedness and necessary tools likely reflects the general state of forestry in the Czech Republic; church properties cannot be viewed in isolation. Conversely, findings suggest that society may not explicitly expect a distinct approach. Therefore, the solution for both sides lies in improved education and the systematic acquisition of communication competencies.

The findings of our study offer several strong and original insights, for example: the absence of a perceived influence of Christian philosophy on management and communication, the lack

of awareness of *Laudato si'* among employees, and the absence of specific communication strategies in most entities.

The management of forest property, which is essentially influenced (whether positively or negatively) by a certain philosophy or social assumptions, can determine the resulting perception by the public. However, the public usually does not expect forest owners or administrators of church and religious societies to communicate differently from other owners or administrators. Planning documents are often central for foresters. Here, one can appeal for greater use of various strategies and conventions, including the content and meaning of the encyclical. Unfortunately, it often turns out that this works with difficulty at local levels (Holušová et al. 2025). It can be concluded that the restitution of church property has been completed or finalised after more than 10 years. From this perspective, church forests are an important form of ownership that identifies and legitimises itself in its own way (i.e. it appears separately in negotiations, has its representatives among the SVOL). Church forests are also stabilising from an economic point of view, and it is possible to reconcile the time series of their development within the framework of management, implementation of various activities for the public, etc. Therefore, it has a normative and narrative identity that can be further researched and special approaches proposed, e.g. in different communication from other types of forest owners, from whom we more or less expect a different management philosophy and approaches.

## CONCLUSION

The hypothesis that society expects a distinct communication style for ecclesiastical forest properties was refuted. Based on the survey responses, the public does not expect specialised communication or unique management practices from church-owned entities.

Among the large economic subjects managing church property, only one was found to handle public communication systematically. This specific entity manages extensive holdings with a significant number of employees and operates independently of direct church administration. While landowners and forest managers associate through shared strategies and internal church networks – meeting

primarily during holidays and celebrations – the church does not intervene in external communication. Consequently, employees of these economic entities do not perceive any church-specific influence on their outreach activities.

In general, employees of these entities lack formalised rules or recommendations for public engagement. Communication is frequently avoided or left to the discretion of individual managers. It can be concluded that most of the studied economic subjects have yet to address public relations issues, nor do they seek a distinct communication approach based on the ecclesiastical nature of the property.

The theoretical framework emphasises that effective, strategically managed communication – ideally moving from one-way information transfer towards two-way stakeholder engagement – is essential for aligning forestry practices with public expectations, and for strengthening the social legitimacy of the sector. Despite the literature highlighting the increasing importance of communication, the analysed entities largely lack systematic, professional communication strategies. Communication activities tend to be fragmented and intuitive, often being delegated to individual foresters without clear guidance. This corresponds with the model of predominantly one-way, reactive communication described in the theoretical section. Only one of the analysed entities demonstrates features of strategic communication, such as dedicated personnel and planned activities; the others show a minimal or non-existent structured approach.

At the same time, the empirical data both refine and partially challenge the initial theoretical expectations regarding stakeholder differentiation. The idea that church ownership might generate specific public expectations or require a distinct communication approach is not supported. In our research, most respondents do not perceive or expect a different way of communication. This suggests that ownership type alone does not automatically result in differentiated communication practices or a recognisable identity in the eyes of the public. From a legitimacy theory perspective, this suggests that church forest enterprises currently derive their social acceptance not from distinct value-based communication, but from conforming to general forestry practices. Furthermore, the lack of explicit integration of value-oriented frameworks, such as the principles set out in the encyclical *Laudato si'*, shows that there is an unused potential to in-

corporate ethical or spiritually grounded narratives into communication. Thus, the anticipated link between ownership identity and communication philosophy is empirically weak.

Overall, the study confirms the theoretical claim that communication is a critical yet underdeveloped component of Czech forestry. However, it also demonstrates that neither internal organisational settings nor external public expectations currently drive the creation of differentiated communication strategies in the specific case of church forest ownership. The results, therefore, highlight an untapped potential: church forest enterprises could enhance their societal role and legitimacy by improving the professionalism of their communication and more explicitly articulating their unique ownership context.

In terms of outlining the possibilities and methods of communication, strategies for church forest managers and topics that communication approaches can address can be broadly proposed: biodiversity protection as a realisation of Christian ethics, sustainability and the importance of social aspects in forestry, safety and prevention (e.g. against catastrophic events due to climate change), including the use of appropriate channels (such as social media for younger groups), which should be a priority for church forest managers, etc. This should also be the subject of further research.

Furthermore, although significant guiding documents such as Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'* exist and encourage enhanced communication and stewardship, the staff within these entities are largely unfamiliar with them. Therefore, future research should also focus on the development and implementation of both internal and external communication strategies, including the establishment of formal recommendations and procedural frameworks.

**Data availability statement:** The data will be available in the MENDELU repository at: <https://repozitar.mendelu.cz>.

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