

Congregations and rural development

The case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

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Abstract

Approximately 84 percent of Finns are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Most of the Church's 562 congregations are located in rural areas. In local communities Church congregations typically play a significant role, providing job opportunities, offering various services and promoting social and mental welfare.

This paper examines the role that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and its congregations have in rural development. The activities of the rural congregations are examined, firstly, from the point of view of rural development on the whole. What is the potential of the congregations in rural development? Secondly, the role of congregations in rural development is examined by taking into consideration the religious motivations and justifications that the Church and congregations give for their social action.

Keywords: *religion, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, congregations, rural development, community attachment, social sustainability*

Introduction

In the history of rural studies there have been only few studies that have focussed on the relationship between religion and rural questions (see, however Davies et al. 1991; Francis 1996; Liu et al. 1998; Walker 2002; Meyer et al. 2003). Further, in the field of religious studies interest in rural questions has been rare (Winter 1991). This is surprising if one considers the prominent role which, for example, Christian congregations and churches have traditionally played in rural areas and in the lives of rural societies throughout Europe.

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to this neglected area of research by examining the role that the Evangelical Lutheran Church and its congregations have in rural development in Finland.

In Finnish rural policy discussions and debates, religion and religious actors have thus far been a minor point. For example, in the national Rural Policy Programme for 2001-2004 religion is portrayed as a kind of cultural relic: "Nature religions, the Catholic Church, and the Lutheran Church have influenced Finnish Culture for centuries, and, depending on the geographical area, the Russian Orthodox Church and revival movements have also characterised it. Old religion has often endured longer in the country-

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side than in the cities.” The main topic and objective of rural policy is rural development. The importance of cooperation, partnership and networking is continuously emphasised in the programme. Ministries and other bodies of central administration, municipalities, villages, Local Action Groups, enterprises, farms etc. are mentioned as key actors in this process. The Evangelical Lutheran Church or congregations are not included (Countryside for the People 2000).

However, in the most recent Rural Policy Programme (for 2005-2008), the role of the Church and congregations has finally been introduced (Elinvoimainen maaseutu – yhteinen vastuumme 2004). In the following, we will attempt to shine light on this change and point out some of the issues raised by introducing religious actors into the arena of rural development.

The role of the Church in Finnish society

The Evangelical Lutheran Church holds a special position in Finnish Society. Approximately 84 percent of Finns are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (that is, 4.4 million of 5.2 million people). Therefore the Church has had and still has an important role in the lives of most Finnish citizens. The Church maintains, for example, some very popular initiation and calendar rites, such as baptisms, confirmation classes, weddings and funerals (Niemelä, 2003).

The special position of the Church in Finnish society is crystallised in the idea of the Folk Church. The idea of the Folk Church includes, firstly, that the Church attempts to be open to and respond to all opinions which rise among its members. Secondly, as a Folk Church, the Church puts an emphasis on its position as an educator of the Christian message and Christian values for the Finnish people. Thirdly, the status of the Folk Church requires that the Church is socially active in many different respects (Veikkola 1990; Murtorinne 1995). Especially in recent decades, the Church has emphasised its social responsibility in modern society. It has, for example, actively criticised certain policies of the Finnish Government and has strongly defended the idea of the Nordic welfare state (see Pesonen 2004; Heikkilä et al. 2000).

Another example of this emphasis on the social responsibility of the Church is the environmental activities that the Church has carried out, especially from the beginning of the 1990s onwards. These activities have included, among others, ecological action by congregations, publications by the Church and various public stands taken by Church employees and institutions. Environmental work by the Church reached its climax in the year 2001 when the Church founded its own environmental programme called the Church Environmental Diploma. This diploma follows international environmental programme standards and functions as follows: When a local congregation meets the requirements of the programme, it can apply for the diploma. These requirements deal with, for example, environmental education in congregations, ecologically sustainable management of forests that congregations own, or the management of cemeteries. Presently around 20 of 562 congregations have applied for and received the diploma, and most of these are located in city areas (Pesonen 2004).

The role of the Church in social questions is, however, not as unproblematic as one may imagine from the examples above. Since, as a Folk Church, the Church tries to take into account all the opinions of its members, it necessarily means that it cannot be very radical in social issues. This means, in its turn, that when the Church takes a stand on

public social issues it has to face and deal with certain outlooks that are not accepted by the majority of its members. In these situations the conditions that regulate the social action of the Church become visible. For example, when the Church started to carry out environmental activities, it also had to face the opinions of the radical wings of the environmental movement. These opinions include, among others, views that place humans on the same plane as other creatures of Creation. This is contrary to the views of the majority of the Church members, who see that humans – as created in the image of God – have a special status in Creation. Therefore, the Church has to make clear to its members that the environmental work that the Church carries out does not shake the position of the human being, but is work that is done especially for future human generations (Pesonen 2004).

Another factor that shapes the role of the Church in social questions is the charismatic wing, which has had quite a strong effect on the Church, especially since the 1960s. The representatives of this wing emphasise the importance of personal religious experience. They also strongly criticise the social emphasis of the Folk Church. They think that this emphasis necessarily leads to situations, where the Church denies its actual spiritual task, and this, in its turn, leads to the secularisation of the Church. The final consequence of this will be, according to the representatives of the charismatic movement, the fact that the Church as a community of believers will disappear (Murtorinne 1977; 1995).

It is therefore possible to state that these two factors, namely the necessity of balancing the various opinions of the members and the influence of the charismatic wing, direct, at least partly, the social work done by the Church. What is, then, the case with the work that the Church and congregations do for rural development? What kinds of conditions regulate these activities?

The Church and rural questions

Even though the Church administration and some congregations as well as the employees of the Church have been active in environmental questions and social issues on the whole, interest has not directly been focussed on rural questions until very recently. In the 1970s and 1980s the Church was much more interested in the welfare of its members in growing cities than in the countryside. One sign of this is that there are quite a few Church publications from the 1970s onwards focussing on the Church of the city and city congregations, but none on the rural Church. However, moving into the new millennium, the Church has begun to pay much more attention to rural issues and to the position of rural congregations.

One reason for this new interest can be found in recent societal changes. When Finland became a member of the European Union in 1995, a very profound structural change in Finnish society was launched. One dimension of this change has been an increased migration from the countryside to city areas. Young people and people of working age especially have moved to population centres where jobs are concentrated and most of the places to study are located. One consequence of this migration is the fact that the population of rural areas is ageing (Countryside for the People 2000). This, in its turn, affects the economic resources of the congregations. Rural congregations, as well as rural municipalities, receive most of their income as taxes from their members. When a tax-paying population moves to urban areas, small rural congregations espe-

cially face severe economic problems. Congregations have, because of this, been forced to increase the efficiency of their activities and to develop new kinds of cooperation with other actors in the countryside (Häkkinen 2003).

This structural change in Finnish society has also awakened the Church administration to pay more attention to the problems of rural congregations and rural issues in general. This is also inevitable because most of its 562 congregations are located in rural areas. One indicator of this new interest is the founding of the Rural Workgroup of the Church in 2001. This group aims to begin a process of forming a rural policy on behalf of the Church that would examine the problems of the emptying countryside from inside the Church. An anthology called "Church and countryside" (Kirkko ja maaseutu) was published in 2003 as a result of the work of this group. The Church has also channelled its funding so that the financial aid for the congregations is mostly given to various development projects. Generally speaking, the Church has in recent years started to discuss its role in rural development more actively. One indication of this is the fact that the Church has named the development of cooperation between congregations and other local actors as one of its most important future objectives.

One question that arises from the facts mentioned above is as follows: What is the likelihood of the Church accomplishing these objectives, especially in rural areas? Even though over 350 congregations are located in rural areas, most Church members live in large cities. When noticing the fact that from the Church's point of view, the population in city areas is the most secularised, it is self-evident that the Church has to put a great effort in these areas. Traces of this dilemma can be seen in the "Mission, vision, and strategy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland 2010", where it is stated, that "securing the future of the Church includes searching for new ways to become part of the urban lifestyle". The migration from the countryside in urban areas and its consequences are presented as inevitable, and there is no direct mention of how the Church is going to become part of the rural lifestyle, or, in other words, what kinds of activities the Church is going to carry out for congregations in rural areas and rural development on the whole. This dilemma has also been noticed by rural congregations. The employees in many congregations are concerned that the Church does not take the problems of rural people seriously and that it does not, for example, give enough economic support to rural congregations so that they are able to maintain even basic operations.

If this fear felt by rural congregations is correct, it is especially problematic as rural congregations have great potential to improve the quality of life of local people. What is this potential? What kinds of social activities do congregations already carry out in rural areas?

Congregations and rural development

Although Finns do not very frequently take part in Church activities (around 5-10 percent of the members of the Church attend services regularly), in rural communities the Church congregations typically play a significant role. Various surveys show that Finns are more religiously active in the countryside than in the cities; people in rural areas attend Church services much more regularly than those living in city areas (Salonen et al. 2000; Kääriäinen et al. 2004; Häkkinen 2003). Additionally, in many rural areas the membership of the Church is more than 90 percent of the population, whereas in the largest cities that figure can be below 80 percent. In many parts of the Finnish

countryside congregations still have a meaningful status amongst their members (Kääriäinen et al. 2004; Häkkinen 2003). It can be stated, therefore, that congregations have great potential to carry out significant social activities in rural areas. How is this potential utilised?

One indicator of the new kind of interest of the Church in rural issues is the two surveys that the Church administration has carried out amongst its congregational employees. In both surveys employees were asked to describe the work that congregations do and should do for rural development. First of all, the employees brought up the basic spiritual task of the Church, that is, the task to preach the Gospel and to spread love for one's neighbour. In the case of rural development this was said to mean, for example, special church services for farmers and harvest festivals organised by congregations. Secondly, the representatives of the congregations emphasised the spiritual and mental support that they can offer to the members of their communities. Thirdly, employees mentioned the social work done by deacons or lay workers. This is the work that congregations traditionally do, for example, amongst the poor, alcoholics or the elderly people. Furthermore, the employees brought up the work congregations do in villages and with village councils. This work includes, for example, various social circles and meetings for families and elderly people.

When asked about partnerships with other actors in the community, employees listed 5 actual partners. These are other congregations, local municipalities, village councils, various non-profit organisations, and local enterprises. The most significant partners are, of course, other congregations. Traditionally, Evangelical Lutheran congregations have been very autonomous, each having its own administration. They have also emphasised their independent role in the Church, as the "small Churches inside the main Church". During the severe economic depression that Finland experienced in the 1990s congregations had to intensify cooperation with each other by, for example, founding common administrative offices and centralising services. This, along with the structural change of the Finnish society, has forced rural congregations to rethink the idea of their autonomy. Many rural congregations have either united or have formed various types of congregation unions.

The same kind of process has also forced congregations and local municipalities to find new types of partnerships. Many rural congregations and local municipalities nowadays cooperate intensively in many different areas. Such cooperation includes social work, day care services and services for the elderly. The cooperation that congregations carry out with village councils, non-profit organisations, and local enterprises, includes the same types of activities as mentioned above. Generally speaking, the types of partnership that congregations carry out in rural areas are based on the same basic activities that congregations usually do, whether they are located in the cities or in the countryside.

This can also be seen in the answers to the survey in which congregational employees mostly named traditional congregational activities as the work for rural development. In other words, the traditional functions of the congregations are in a way re-framed (Goffman 1986) as work for rural development. This indicates that the employees, in most cases, do not think that the congregations should have any special role or task in rural development, but, instead, should concentrate on doing (and applying) their traditional spiritual task as well as possible for the benefit of their communities.

This basic work carried on by the congregations also indicates that the congregations have an especially important role in small communities, where they often are the only actors who look after the people who are in the worst life situations. Small rural congregations (which may consist of one or two clergymen, a deacon and a couple of other employees) also have, when compared to big city congregations, the advantage that most of the people in the congregation know each other. Therefore, the relationships between congregational employees and local people can grow to be more communicative than formal. The employees of small congregations often emphasise this fact. They state that the smallness of the congregation is a benefit rather than a disadvantage, because local people usually consider the congregation as an important part of their community.

Congregations and community attachment

When considering the social work done by congregations in rural areas from the point of view of “community attachment”, that is, from the point of view of how people commit to their places of residence (Liu et al. 1998), it is possible to state that Finnish Evangelical Lutheran congregations carry out activities that have a great potential to strengthen community attachment. In a systemic model, community attachment is said to have three dimensions: the interpersonal dimension, the participation dimension and the sentiments dimension (Beggs et al. 1996).

When applying these dimensions to the case of Finnish Evangelical Lutheran congregations it can, firstly, be supposed that the active membership in rural congregations (which is quite high, as shown above) includes the potential to create interpersonal ties with like-minded people (see Liu et al. 1998). These ties, then, reinforce a sense of community on the whole. The participation dimension, in its turn, is especially significant in the case of Finnish congregations, because the work of the congregations is in many ways dependent on the contribution of lay volunteers. The work done by volunteers covers all forms of congregational work, but its importance is especially high in social work (Salonen et al. 2000; Yeung 2003). Congregations have about 20 000 employees, and 200 000 volunteer workers. Therefore it is natural that in many rural congregations employees are worried about the fact that volunteers are getting older, as well as about the difficulty of recruiting new volunteers.

Other forms of participation that congregations offer to local people are various social circles, meetings, and clubs which are often held in villages, where these kinds of activities are rarely organised by other rural actors (see also Winter 1991). Congregations also have a lay administration, called the parish council, which consists of from 11 to 39 lay members, depending on the size of the congregation. These members are chosen by elections held every four years throughout the country (Mäkeläinen 2005). All in all, it can be stated that by fulfilling their basic task, rural Evangelical Lutheran congregations are also carrying out various participatory functions among rural people.

The congregations’ role in encouraging the participation and mobilisation of local people form one of the bases for the sentiments dimension of community attachment. This dimension includes the subjective or affective side of community attachment, and can also be called a “sense of community” (Liu et al. 1998). When examining the case of rural congregations it is possible to study the formation of the sense of community from two points of view. Firstly, as stated above, the sense of community can be seen

developing in the various formal and informal associational ties that people create when attending congregational activities. Secondly, it can be seen in the religiously based feelings and motivations that congregations offer their members. This includes, among others, spiritual and mental support for the local people, which employees of the congregations state as one of their basic tasks in rural development. Special Christian services for rural people, preaching the gospel, praying for rural people, pastoral care and so on, are forms of religious action, which have the potential to give rural residents both hope for the future and the feeling that at least some personal needs are being "satisfied by the community" (Liu et al. 1998).

Discussion and conclusions

The activities that Evangelical Lutheran congregations carry out for rural development are multifaceted. They vary from practical activities, such as economic support for the poorest, to more mental and spiritual activities meant for all members of the Church. The basic feature of the rural work done by the Church is, however, its special religious character. This is the aspect that clearly separates the activities of congregations from the work done by other actors in the countryside. As is shown above, this religious character can be both a disadvantage and have important additional value.

It has been proposed that religiously motivated social action has certain advantages when comparing it to action with no such motivation. This is said to be true, for example, in Christian environmental work, which is justified by ethical and other principles that are based on a long tradition, and which, in the end, lead back to a supernatural motivator. This "chain" between a Christian community and its God is said to give environmental work a much more solid foundation and clearer direction than can ever be the case with secular environmentalism (Albanese 1997). Whether this point of view holds true or not, it anyhow reveals the potential that religiously motivated social work can have. Therefore, it is not of no importance how the Church presents the religious bases for rural development to the congregations. This, in its turn, requires a self-reflective process by the Church, in which the theological starting points are constructed.

This process can be illuminated via the work of Luhmann. He has argued that when dealing with new kinds of social questions, every social system goes through a certain self-reflective process in order to make the information have resonance with the basic function of the system. It can be stated that this self-reflective process, which usually includes a re-reading of the tradition of the system, is essential; otherwise the actors of the social system would not be able to handle the social question at stake. This is also the case with religious subsystems. When religious subsystems or religious institutions face a new social issue, they have to make such an issue resonant with the religious function of the institution (Luhmann 1982; 1989). In other words, the Church, in order to be able to respond to certain social questions such as rural issues, has to find some justification drawn from its tradition.

Therefore, it seems necessary for the Church to construct a special theology of rural development. Some efforts for that have already been made in the anthology "Church and countryside", which has three articles concerning "rural theology". In short, the rural theology that has been outlined in these articles consists of two theological reflections. One is an emphasis on creation and nature, and the other is an emphasis on the

example of Jesus and on redemption. The first one focuses on the Genesis creation story and on humanity's stewardship of creation. The second one sees Jesus as an example of a person who had his roots in a remote rural area and in the everyday life of its people. The strong sermons of Jesus for the poorest and for the despairing are said to spring out of this context (Harmanen 2003; Kainulainen 2003; See also Davies et al. 1991).

The necessity of this kind of theological self-reflection may, however, be dependent on how the Church and the congregations will, in the end, put into practice the role of the Church in rural development. There are at least two options for this. The first option is, as seen above, the re-framing of the basic work that congregations do. This is, of course, the most convenient option, not in need of any special rural theology for its justification. It is, however, possible that some kind of problematisation of the present theological interpretation is a prerequisite for such a re-framing. The second option is a position in which the Church ends up doing work that cannot easily be defined as part of its traditional task. This work can be, for example, being an active participant in rural development projects along with other actors in the countryside. Then a theological self-reflection would be of special importance, because the Church would be taking steps in a new direction that would not necessarily be accepted by all its membership.

Furthermore, when considering the activities of the Church and the congregations from the point of view of rural development, it is important to examine both the possibilities and the limitations that the Church and the congregations have for working towards social sustainability in rural areas. Social sustainability has been argued to require "development to increase individuals' control over their lives, to support and reinforce their identities" (Rannikko 1999). As has been shown above, the basic work that congregations do, has great potential for strengthening community attachment. This includes many forms of participation and sensitisation that congregations offer to local people. However, a crucial question arises: what are the necessary conditions for the Church to be ready to empower rural people? The institutional structure of the Church is traditionally very hierarchical. The "bottom up" approach to increase people's control over their own lives does not necessarily fit well in this hierarchical structure.

It is also possible, that the Church's conceptual and ideological starting point of "spreading the gospel" can be problematic because of its traditionally hierarchical character. Furthermore, as has been already shown, the discussions on the dilemma of the relationship between the spiritual and mundane tasks of the Church are very important in this process. Therefore, when noticing that the Church has lately become more active in rural issues, it is interesting to see how it will deal with these structural and theological questions so that the dimensions of the social sustainability would also become visible in the work of the Church and its congregations.

The special religious character of the rural work of the Church and the congregations also has some interesting implications when considered from the point of view of other rural actors. At the beginning of this paper it was noted that the role of the Church and congregations in rural areas has not been present in either rural studies or in Finnish rural policy. There is no explanation for this; instead more questions arise. In practice, when the Church or congregations apply for funding for development cooperation projects from the State, they cannot (or will not) state the religious motivation for their work in their application. Then the questions that come up are: Is the Church seen as a

legitimate actor in rural development if it wants to give religious justifications for its action? If not, why?

If the Church and the congregations are not seen as legitimate rural actors, and if religious justifications are not accepted, then other rural actors must also have a problem with handling religious discourse. From the perspective of the study of religion as well as from the perspective of rural studies this issue is especially interesting, as it may reveal a need for self-reflective processes within other rural actors besides the Church.

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