

Congregations and rural development: The case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

Heikki Pesonen & Kari Mikko Vesala*

Abstract

Approximately 84 per cent of the Finns are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Most of the 576 congregations are located in rural areas. Although attendance in Church activities is generally low, in local communities the Church congregations typically play a significant role. Congregations maintain jobs, offer various services, promote social and mental welfare, and strengthen the sense of community.

Migration from countryside to city areas has increased in Finland during the 1990's. Congregations have, in the same way as rural municipalities, been forced to face new kinds of problems and challenges caused by migration. Partly because of that, the Church has in recent years become more active in rural questions. The Church has started to discuss its role in rural development, which it did not do before. As one of its most important future objectives the church has named the developing of cooperation between congregations and other local actors.

This paper examines the role that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and its congregations have in rural development. As a research material is used both the Church documents and two recent enquiries, that the Church has made among congregation employees. Research material is analysed from two standpoints. Firstly, the activities of the Church and rural congregations are examined from the point of view of rural development on the whole. Following question will be answered: What are the potentials and strengths of the Church and congregations in rural development? Secondly, the role of congregations in rural development is examined by taking into consideration the fact that congregations are religious communities. In other words, the interest will be in the religious motivations and justifications that the Church and congregations give for their social action, especially in issues concerning rural development.

Religion and rural issues as a topic of study

As a research topic the combination of religion and rural questions is attractive in many ways. Being both in the field of rural studies as well as in the field of religious studies this research is located in an area that has rarely been studied. In the history of rural studies there have been only few studies that have had as their main focus the relation between religion and rural questions (See, however Davies *et al.*, 1991; Liu *et al.*, 1998; Walker 2002; Meyer *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, in the field of religious studies the interest in rural questions has been at least as rare as in rural studies. (Winter, 1991.) Naturally the Church sociologists have done research on congregations, but usually they have not emphasized rural issues.

The topic is even more interesting when noticing that in the Finnish rural policy the role of the religion in the rural development has not been seen at all. In the Rural Policy Programme for 2001-2004 religion is mentioned only as a kind of cultural relic: "Nature religions, Catholic Church, and Lutheran Church have influenced Finnish Culture for centuries, and,

* University of Helsinki, Mikkeli Institute for Rural Research and Training, Lönnrotinkatu 3-5, FIN-50100 Mikkeli, Finland; Email: heikki.pesonen@helsinki.fi

depending on the geographical area, also Russian Orthodox Church and revival movements have characterized it. Old religion has often remained longer in countryside than in the cities.” The importance of cooperation, partnership and networking is continuously emphasized in the programme, and municipalities, villages, enterprises, farms etc. are said to be as key actors in this process. Religion, the Evangelical Lutheran Church or congregations are not mentioned at all. (Countryside for the people, 2000)

The role of the Church in Finnish society

This neglect is especially problematic when noticing the special position that the Church holds in Finnish Society. Approximately 84 per cent of the 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, like baprtism, confirmation classes, weddings and funerals. (Niemelä, 2003.)

The special position of the Church in Finnish society is crystallized in the idea of the Folk Church. The idea of the Folk Church includes, firstly, that the Church attempts to be open for 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 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. Especially in recent decades, the Church has emphasized its social responsibility in modern society. It has, for example, actively criticized the policy of Finnish Government, and strongly defended the idea of Nordic welfare state. (See Pesonen, 2004; Veikkola, 1990; Murtorinne, 1995.)

Another example of this emphasis of social responsibility of the Church is the environmental activities that the Church has carried out especially from the beginning of the 1990s onwards. This has included, among others, ecological action by congregations, publications by the Church and various public stands taken by the Church employees and institutions. Environmental work by the Church reached its climax in year 2001 when the Church founded its own environmental programme, called as the Church Environmental Diploma. This diploma follows international environmental programme standards, and it 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 management of cemeteries. Up to the present day around 20 of 576 congregations have applied and received the diploma, and most of them are located in city areas. (Pesonen, 2004.)

The role of the Church in social questions is, however, not as unproblematic as one could imagine from the examples above. When, as a Folk Church, the Church tries to take into account all the opinions of its members, it indicates necessarily 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 are becoming visible. For example, when the Church has started to carry out environmental activities it has also had to face the opinions of the radical wings of the environmental movement. These opinions include, among others, views that place humans on a same plane than other creatures of the Creation. This is in contrary to the views of the majority of the Church members, who see that humans – as the images of God – have a special status in the

Creation. Therefore, the Church has to emphasize to its members, that the environmental work that the Church is carrying 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 that has had quite a strong affect on the Church especially from 1960's onwards. The representatives of this wing emphasize the importance of personal religious experience. They also strongly criticize the social emphasis of the Folk Church. They think that this emphasis necessarily leads to situation, where the Church denies its actual spiritual task, and this, in its turn, leads to the secularization 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 the believers will disappear. (Murtorinne, 1977; 1995.)

It is, therefore, possible to state that these two factors, namely the balancing between various opinions of the members and the influence of the charismatic wing direct, at least partly, the social work 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 Church employees have been active in environmental questions and social issues on the whole, interest has not directly been focused on rural questions until very recently. In 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 of the Church publications from 1970s onwards focusing on city Church and city congregations but none on rural Church. However, when moving towards the new millenium, the Church has begun to pay much more attention to rural issues and to the position of rural congregations.

One reason for that new interest can be found in the recent societal changes. When Finland became a member of the European Union in 1995, the membership launched a very profound structural change in Finnish society. One dimension of this change has been an increased migration from countryside to city areas. Especially young people and people of working age have moved to population centres, where the jobs are concentrated and most of the student places are located. One consequence of this migration is the fact, that the population of the rural areas grows older. (Countryside for the people, 2000.) This, in its turn, affects the economical resources of the congregations. Rural congregations, as well as rural municipalities, receive most of their income as taxes from their members. When tax-paying population is moving to urban areas, especially small rural congregations are facing severe economical problems. Congregations have, because of that, been forced to increase the efficiency of their activities, and to develop new kinds of cooperation with other actors in the countryside. (Häkkinen, 2003.)

The structural change of Finnish society has also awakened the Church administration to pay more attention to the problems of the rural congregations and rural issues in general. This is also inevitable because most of the 576 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 stated as its aim to begin a process of rural policy of the Church that would examine the problems of 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 channeled 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 more actively its role in rural development. One indication of that is the fact, that the Church has named the developing of cooperation between congregations and other local actors as one of its most important future objectives.

One necessary question that arises from the basis of the facts mentioned above is as follows: what are the possibilities and potentials for the Church to accomplish these objectives, especially in rural areas? Even though over 350 congregations are located in rural areas, most of the Church members live in the big cities. When noticing the fact, that, from the Church's point of view, the population at the city areas is the most secularized, it is self-evident that the Church has to put a great effort on the work in these areas. At least 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 of new ways to get inside urban lifestyle". The migration from countryside to rural areas and its consequences are presented as inevitable, and there is no direct mention on how the Church is going to get inside rural lifestyle, or, in other words, what kinds of activities Church is going to carry out for congregations in rural areas and rural development on the whole. This dilemma has also been noticed in rural congregations. The employees in many congregations are concerned, that the Church does not take the problems of rural people seriously, and don't, for example, give enough economical support for rural congregations so that they could maintain even their basic operations.

If this fear in rural congregations is correct, it is especially problematic, because rural congregations have a lot of possibilities and potentials to improve the quality of life of local people. What are these potentials? What kinds of social activities do congregations already carry out in rural areas?

Congregations and rural development

Although Finns don't take very frequently part in the Church activities (around 5-10 per cent of the members of the Church attend services regularly), in local rural communities the Church congregations typically play a significant role. According to statistics the Finns are more religiously active in the countryside than in the cities. This can be seen in the results of various enquiries, which show that people in the rural areas use the Church services much more regularly than those living in city areas. Also, in many rural areas the membership of the Church is more than 90 per cent of the population, whereas in the biggest cities it can be below 80 per cent. In many parts of the Finnish countryside the congregations have still a meaningful status amongst their members. (Kirkon tilastollinen vuosikirja, 2002; Häkkinen, 2003.) It can be stated, therefore, that congregations have a lot of potential to carry out significant social activities in rural areas. How this potential is utilized?

One indicator of the new kind of interest of the Church in rural issues is the two enquiries that the Church administration has done amongst the employees of the congregations. In both of the enquiries employees are asked to describe the work that congregations do and should do for rural development. First of all, the employees bring up the basic spiritual task of the Church, that is, the task to preach the Gospel and to spread the love for one's neighbour. In the case of rural development this is said to mean, for example, special church services for farmers and harvest festivals organized by congregations. Secondly, the representatives of the congregations emphasize the spiritual and mental support that they can offer to the members

of their communities. Thirdly, employees raise the social work done by deacon or lay worker. This is the work that congregations traditionally do, for example, amongst the poor people, alcoholics or elderly people. Furthermore, the employees bring up the work congregations do in villages and with village councils. This includes, among others, various circles and meetings for, for example, families and elderly people.

When answering the question about partnership relations with other actors in the community, employees bring up 5 actual of possible partners. They are other congregations, local municipalities, village councils, various non-profit organizations, and local enterprises. The most significant partners are, of course, other congregations. Traditionally Evangelical Lutheran congregations have been very independent, each having its own administration. They have also emphasized their independent role in the Church, as the “small Churches inside the main Church”. During the severe economical depression that Finnish society experienced in 1990’s congregations had to intensify cooperation with each others by, for example, founding common administrative offices and centralizing services. This, along with the structural change of Finnish society, has forced rural congregations to rethink the idea of their independency. Many rural congregations have either united or have formed various types of incorporations.

The same kind of process has also forced congregations and local municipalities to find new ways of partnership relations. Many rural congregations and local municipalities have nowadays intensive cooperation in many different areas. This includes, among others, social work, day care services and services for elderly people. The cooperation, which congregations carry out with village councils, non-profit organizations, and local enterprises includes same kinds of forms as mentioned above. Generally speaking, the forms of partnership, which congregations carry out in rural areas, are based on the same basic activities that congregations usually do, whether they were located in the cities or in the countryside.

This can also be seen in the answers of the enquiry, where the employees mostly name traditional activities of the congregations as the work for rural development. In other words, 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, don’t think that the congregations should have any special role or task in rural development, but, instead, should concentrate doing (and applying) their traditional spiritual task as well as possible for the benefit of their communities.

This basic work that the congregations do indicates also, that the congregations have an important role especially in small communities, where they often are the only actors who look after the people, who are in the worst condition of life. Small rural congregations (for example one or two clergymen, a deacon and couple other employees) have, when comparing to big city congregations, also the advantage that most of the people know each other. Therefore, the relations between congregation employees and local people can get more communicative than formal. The employees of the small congregations also often emphasize this fact. They state, that the smallness of the congregation is a benefit rather than disadvantage, because local people usually consider the congregation as an important part of their community.

Congregations and community attachment

When considering the social work 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 (see Liu *et al.*, 1998) it is possible to state, that Finnish Evangelical Lutheran congregations carry out activities that at least 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 showed above) include a potential to create interpersonal ties with like-minded persons (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 dependend on the contribution by lay volunteers. The work done by the volunteers covers all forms of congregation work, but its importance is especially high in social work. (Salonen *et al.*, 2000.) (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 volunteees are getting older, as well as about the difficulty to recruit new volunteers.

Other ways of participation, that congregations offer to local people are various 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 have also a lay administration, called as parochial council, which consists of from 11 to 39 lay members, depending on the size of the congregation. These members are chosen by elections that are held every four years throughout the country (Mäkeläinen, 2004). All in all, it can be stated, that, by fulfilling their basic task, the rural Evangelical Lutheran congregations are also carrying out various participatory processes among rural people.

The processess of participating and mobilization of local people by the congregations form one of the bases for the sentiments dimension of the community attachment. This dimension includes the subjective or affective side of community attachment, and can shortly be named as 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, which people create when attending congregation activities. Secondly, it can be seen in the religiously based feelings and motivations that congregations offer for their members. This includes, among others, the 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 the rural people, preaching the gospel, praying for the rural people, pastoral care and so on, are forms of religious action, which have a potential to give rural residents both hope for future and feeling, that at least some personal needs are being “satisfied by the community” (Liu *et al.*, 1998).

Conclusions

The activities that Evangelical Lutheran congregations carry out for rural development are many-sided. 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 by the Church is, however, its special religious character. This is the aspect that

clearly separates the activities by congregations from the work by other actors in the countryside. As is shown above, this religious character can be both a disadvantage and have important surplus value.

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

This process can be illuminated with the help of the theoretical perspectives by sociologist Niklas 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 to have resonance with the basic function of the system. It can be stated, that this self-reflective process, which usually includes re-reading of the tradition of the system, is essential, because 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 subsystem. When religious subsystem or religious institution faces new kind of social issue, it has to make this issue to have resonance 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 a justification for its action from its tradition.

Therefore, it seems necessary for the Church to construct also a special theology of rural development. Some efforts for that have already been made in an 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 emphasis focuses on the Genesis creation story and on humanity’s stewardship of creation. The second emphasis sees Jesus as an example of a person who had his roots in the remote rural area and in the everyday life of its people. The strong preaching by Jesus for the poorest and for the despairing is said to well up from this context. (Kirkko ja maaseutu, 2003; See also Davies *et al.*, 1991.)

The necessity for this kind of theological self-reflection may, however, be dependent on how the Church and the congregations shall, in the end, put into practice the role of the Church in rural development. There are at least two options for that. First option is, as seen above, the re-framing of the basic work that congregations do. This is, of course, the most convenient way, and does not necessarily need any special rural theology as its justification. It is, however, possible that some kind of problematization of the present theological interpretations is a prerequisite also for this kind of re-framing. The second option is the 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, as being an active participant in rural development projects with other actors in the countryside. Then a theological self-reflection

would be of special importance, because the Church would be taking steps towards a new direction that would not necessarily be accepted by all of its members.

Furthermore, when considering the activities by the Church and the congregations from the point of view of rural development, it is important to examine the potentials and restrictions that the Church and the congregations have for developing social sustainability in rural areas. Social sustainability has been said to require “development to increase individuals’ control over their lives, support and reinforce their identities” (Rannikko, 1999). As has been shown above, the basic work that congregations do, have a lot of potential to strengthen community attachment. This includes, among others, many ways of participation and sensitization that congregations offer for local people. However, the question arises that, under what conditions the Church is ready to empower rural people? The institutional structure of the Church is traditionally very hierarchical. The “bottom up” increase of people’s control over their own lives does not necessarily fit well in this hierarchical structure.

It is also possible to state, that the Churches’ conceptual and ideological starting point of “spreading the gospel” can be problematic, because of its traditionally hierarchical character. Furthermore, as has been shown above, discussing the whole dilemma of the relation between the spiritual and the mundane task of the Church has a very important role in this process. Therefore, when noticing that the Church has lately become more active in rural issues, it is interesting to see how it is going to deal with these structural and theological questions so, that the dimensions of the social sustainability would become visible also in the work of the Church and its congregations.

The special religious character of rural work of the Church and the congregations has also some interesting implications, when considering it from the point of view of other rural actors. For the sake of impartiality it is necessary to get back to the notice presented in the beginning of this paper, where it is said, that the role of the Church and congregations in rural areas has not been present in either rural studies or in the Finnish rural policy. We have no explanation for that, but instead some more questions. It has been seen in practice, that when the Church or congregations apply funding for development cooperation projects from the State, they cannot express in the application the religious reasons for their work. The questions that come up from this 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, it indicates, that other rural actors 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, because it may tell about the need for self-reflective process also within other rural actors than the Church.

References

Albanese, C. L. (1997). Having Nature All Ways: Liberal and Transcendental Perspectives on American Environmentalism. *The Journal of Religion* 77(1), 20-43.

Beggs, J.J., Hurlbert, J.S. and Haines, V.A. (1996) Community Attachment in a Rural Setting: A Refinement and Empirical Test of the Systemic Model. *Rural Sociology* vol 61, No. 3, 407-426.

Countryside for the People. Rural Policy based on Will. Rural policy programme for 2001-2004. Summary. Rural Policy Committee. 2000.

Davies, D., Watkins, C. and Winter, M. (1991) Church and Religion in Rural England. T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

Goffman, E. (1974/1986) Frame Analysis. North Eastern University Press, Boston.

Ihmisten maaseutu. Tahdon maaseutupolitiikka. Maaseutupoliittinen kokonaisuohjelma vuosille 2001-2004. Maaseutupolitiikan yhteistyöryhmä. 2000.

Häkkinen, S. (2003) Seurakunnat maaseudun tukena. In Kirkko ja maaseutu. Kirkon maaseututyöryhmän puheenvuoro, 50-62. Suomen ev.lut. kirkon keskushallinto. Sarja C 2003: 3.

Kirkon tilastollinen vuosikirja 2002. Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko. Kirkkohallitus, Helsinki.

Liu, A., Ryan, V., Aurbach, H. and Besser, T. (1998) The Influence of Local Church Participation on Rural Community Attachment. Rural Sociology 63(3), 432-450.

Luhmann, N. (1982). The Differentiation of Society. Translated by Stephen Holmes and Charles Larmore. Columbia University Press, New York.

Luhmann, N. (1989). Ecological Communication. Translated and introduced by John Bednarz Jr. Polity Press, Oxford.

Meyer, K. and Lobao, L. (2003) Economic hardship, religion and mental health during the midwestern farm crisis. Journal of Rural Studies 19, 139-155.

Murtorinne, E. (1977). Kirkon seitsemän vuosikymmentä. In Kirkko suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa 1990-luvulla, 7-25, Heikkilä, M. and Murtorinne, E. (eds.) Helsinki, Kirjapaja.

Murtorinne, E. (1995) Suomen kirkon historia 4. Sortovuosista nykypäiviin 1900-1990. Porvoo, WSOY.

Mäkeläinen, H. (2004) Church Administrative Structure. <<http://www.evl.fi/english/index.html>>

Niemelä, K. (2003) Uskonnollisuus eri väestöryhmissä. In Moderni kirkkokansa. Suomalaisten uskonnollisuus uudella vuosituhatluvulla, pp. 187-221, Kääriäinen, K., Niemelä, K., Ketola, K. Kirkon tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisuja 82. Tampere.

Pesonen, H. (2004). Vihertyvä kirkko. Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko ympäristötoimijana. Bidrag till kännedom av Finlands folk och natur 161. Suomen Tiedeseura, Helsinki.

Rannikko, P. (1999). Combining Social and Ecological Sustainability in the Nordic Forest Periphery. Sociologia Ruralis, Vol. 39, No 3, 394-410.

Salonen, K., Kääriäinen, K. and Niemelä K. (2000) Kirkko uudelle vuositukselle. Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko vuosina 1996-1999. Kirkon Tutkimuskeskus, Tampere.

Veikkola, J. (1990) Kansankirkko suomalaisessa maisemassa. In Kirkko ja politiikka, 343-500, Heikkilä, M., Mustakallio, H., Seppo, J. (eds.). Suomen Kirkkohistoriallisen Seuran toimituksia 153, Helsinki.

Walker, G. (2002) Contemporary Clerical Constructions of a Spiritual Rural Idyll. *Sociologia Ruralis*, Vol. 42, Number 2, 131-142.

Winter, M. (1991) The Sociology of religion and rural sociology. *Sociologia Ruralis* vol xxxi, No. 2/3, 199-208.