SERVANT OF SOLIDARITY, INSTITUTION OF AUTHENTICITY

The dilemma of welfare in the Church of Finland

Abstract

This article focuses on the role of the Evangelical Lutheran church of Finland as an agent of welfare. The aim is to explore the ideal welfare role of the institution of the church in a sociological framework. This inquiry includes answering two particular questions: I) Societal expectations; what are the expectations concerning the present-day welfare activities of the church? II) The nature of the institution; what do these expectations reflect concerning views of an ideal church? The range of the empirical findings of this article could be summarized in one expression, ‘encountering’: expectations of the encountering church. The article ends with theoretical discussion at two levels: first, the institutional level, the perspective of solidarity and authenticity, followed by the societal level, the viewpoint of the secularization narrative, and particularly the question of communication.

Key words: welfare, the church of Finland, solidarity, authenticity, secularization, communication

Introduction

It has been claimed that people in advanced industrial late modern societies have experienced a shift away from tradition, respect for authority, and material values towards self-fulfillment and emancipation. Social institutions, including the churches, are becoming increasingly porous and their boundaries less rigid. (Wuthnow 1998:5, 30; Fukuyama 1999:59–60) Ever since ‘modern times’, societal institutions and modes of communication (Luhmann 1990), have become increasingly fragmented. Present-day institutional religiosity is characterized as vicarious rather than personal, individualism and choice being at the heart of late modern religiosity. At the same time, however, there is increasing uncertainty, risk and ambiguity as well as difference, marginalization and exclusion. (Davie 1994:194; Giddens 1991:6, 9) People may be more and more independent and individualistic – and the change may not be entirely for better.
Choices, however, also have closure and control – the weberian ‘iron cage’ of modernity itself. We are not surrounded simply by independence but dependence as well. To take an example, globalization and expert systems perpetuate values and routinize freedoms. In addition, not everything has changed as drastically as we may think. Despite the emphasis on increasingly independent individuals, social networks continue to be fundamental to most people’s contentment, happiness, and self-esteem. Individuals continue to be members of networks, even of «tribes» (Maffesoli 1996).

Individuals need welfare in order to be content, satisfied, and happy – in order to have relatively stable experiences of ‘good life’. At the present-day crossroads of independence and dependence, what and who constructs our ‘good life’ and ‘welfare’? Many observers, including individuals writing from their own experience, may simply conclude «it is up to you, it is your choice!» Thus, it is even more exciting to contemplate the role of traditional institutions – for instance, majority churches – in the construction of welfare today.

This article focuses on the role of the Evangelical Lutheran church of Finland as an agent of welfare. The aim is to explore the ideal welfare role of the institution of the church in a sociological framework. This inquiry includes answering two particular questions:

I) Societal expectations;
What are the expectations concerning the present-day welfare activities of the church? In other words, what kind of welfare activities is the church expected to engage in?

II) The nature of the institution;
What do these expectations reflect concerning views of an ideal church? That is, what do they tell us about society’s understanding of the unique nature of the church institution?

This inquiry is two-fold, the latter question building on the former.

The data for this inquiry was compiled in the middle-sized Finnish town of Lahti. With its population of approximately 100,000, Lahti is a regional capital and a young city of entrepreneurship. (Lahti, status and area, population and development 2004) The recession of the early 1990s had a substantial impact on its industries; to take an example, during the height of the recession, more than a quarter of its inhabitants were unemployed. (Lahden työttymysaste 1990–2004) With its economic challenges, many of which persist, Lahti poses an interesting and challenging case for welfare research.

The ‘societal expectations’ mentioned above are those imposed on the church by various segments of society. This article builds on three-fold data from Lahti. First, the expectations of local social authorities with regard to social services offered by the Lahti parish union and its parishes as part of the welfare system in general are explored (10 + 2 interviews). Second, the attitude of the local population to the churches’ role as a social agent and as a normative or ethical voice in welfare debates is researched (6 group interviews, altogether 79 individuals, and observation of media and three public discussion events). Third, the viewpoints of the representa-
tives of the Lahti church concerning the welfare role of the local church, both as producer of welfare services and as an opinion-forming actor, are explored (a small survey, N=100, and 29 interviews, of which most are with priests and church social workers).

Before proceeding to the empirical findings it is necessary to examine the context: first, what is the general Finnish situation of welfare and, second, what is the general view of the church’s role in welfare both at the national and local level?

The national situation in welfare and religion

Welfare and its recent challenges

Industrialization took place late in Finland. It was not until the 1960s that the country experienced a radical leap in modernization, which brought with it unprecedented economic prosperity. It was only then that universal welfare provision finally superseded poor relief and Finland joined the other Nordic welfare countries. (Julkunen 2003)

Today the Finnish social protection system follows the principles of the Nordic welfare model, the main features of which are:

- the principle of universality (the right of all to social protection regardless of where they live, their profession or economic position)
- a strong public sector
- tax funding based on the legislative rights of citizens/residents
- equal treatment

The basic economic, social and educational rights are guaranteed in Finland by the state and the municipal authorities.

The Finnish constitution and the legislation on social welfare and health care maintains that all those unable to provide for themselves are entitled to the necessary basic income and care. Secure provision of certain services is considered so important that the legislation gives the individual what is known as a ‘subjective right’ to specific services. These include children’s day-care, certain statutory services for people with disabilities, and the right to emergency medical care. Municipalities are required to reserve adequate funds for the provision of these services in all circumstances. Many social welfare and health care services are, however, based on budget appropriations. (Statutory social welfare and health care services 2004) Thus, services may be targeted at those who need them most. Poorer municipalities might have to cut their welfare services.

The central government, municipalities and employers finance social expenditure in Finland for the most part. The direct contribution to the social protection expenditure made by the insured is far lower in Finland than in the other EU countries. This is a characteristic feature of countries in which benefits are based on the principle of universality. Municipal institutions provide statutory services. The municipalities can also purchase these obligatory services from the private sector or other agents such as the...
church so that private services supplement the public services. (Finnish social protection system 2002)

The general economic development trend in Finland has mainly been positive during the beginning of the 21st century. The only evidence remaining of the harsh recession of the early 1990s is structural unemployment, which continues at a high level, and the relatively large national debt. Furthermore, major issues that have emerged during recent years are the growth of differences between different regions of the country, the increase in income disparities and, thus, the risk of social exclusion. (Promoting social welfare 2004; Report on Social Affairs and Health 2002; Kainulainen et al. 2001) Additionally, Finland is one of Europe’s most rapidly ageing countries (Parjanne 2004). Together with the smaller younger age classes, this development trend will mean great changes in the age structure of the population.

Two specific welfare challenges must be noted. First, during the last few years, considerable changes have occurred in the operation of the Finnish health care system and its working environment. The service system has become more outpatient care-oriented. Second, increasing long-term dependence on social assistance is a fact: the number of social assistance recipients has fallen to some extent in recent years, but costs have not decreased. (Trends in Social Protection in Finland 2002; Toimeentulo-tukea saaneet kotitaloudet kotitaloustyypin mukaan 1990–2000) It has been generally admitted that the support and services are inadequate for those with the most problematic and accumulated difficulties. Marginalization is a reality for many facing long-term unemployment or mental health problems. Less than half of Finnish municipalities considered it possible to provide social services well with current resources and ten percent admitted to having serious difficulties. (Sociobarometer 2006) Measures such as renewing the pension plan and the municipal service structure have been taken. Nevertheless, the increasing responsibility of families and the third sector has been seen in the public debate as unavoidable.

Similar challenges also affect Lahti, the subject of this article. Since the average age is rising, the workforce is decreasing. Unemployment continues to be high. The open care in social services and health care does not have sufficient resources. More specifically, the income level of the elderly in Lahti is particularly low. (Lahden kaupungin tulevaisuspaketti 2004; Lahden kaupunki, talouden seurantatapasi 2004; Lahden kaupunki, talousarvio 2004 ja taloussuunnitelma 2004–2006; Liukko 2004) Lahti has also tackled these challenges in a more visionary manner. One very interesting emphasis in the latest local documents on welfare and social and health care is the strategy of increasing mutual responsibility. The idea is that we do not need – or have sufficient money for – experts in everything in welfare and health. The local documents talk about “cultural and value-related change which aims to strengthen the willingness of local people to support and help each other when needed. Municipal social and health services will concentrate on their core functions in producing services that the local people will then complement with services they acquire themselves.” (Toimintakertomus 2005:1; Liukko 2004) Putting this against the background of the traditional Nordic rhetoric of strong public welfare services, this view is indeed quite radical, creating a
fascinating context for studying welfare and the role of the traditional majority church in it.

The church’s role in welfare at the national and local levels

The Lutheran churches both in Finland and other Nordic countries have played a vital role in shaping the society, and the churches have supported the teachings of caring for one’s neighbors and serving the community (Bäckström 2004; Helander 2005). The status of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland gradually changed from a state church to a folk church in the second half of the 19th century. Nevertheless, both the Evangelical Lutheran and the Orthodox Church still have duties that could be performed by either the state or local government. The parishes keep local population registers of their members, and people belonging to other denominations and those listed on the non-denominational population register are buried in the cemeteries maintained by the parishes.

The present-day Finnish religious environment is interestingly homogenous, 83 per cent of Finns being members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Finland has relatively high levels of private religiosity (e.g., private prayer and belief in God), but only a small minority are monthly church-goers – lower than in most European countries. However, in addition to the main Sunday service, the parishes arrange a wide variety of other religious services, and religious television programmes and radio broadcasts are watched or listened to by the majority of Finns. Furthermore, about half of Finns say they believe in God as taught by Christianity. The proportion of people making this claim increased significantly over the 1990s. Altogether, the trend in Finland in recent decades has been towards declining public religiosity but continuing, even increasing private religiosity, which illustrates that institutional religious decline is not necessarily accompanied by decline in belief.

Church ceremonies enable the parishes to come into contact with almost the entire Finnish population on an annual basis; 87% of all infants are baptized, only about 2% of Finns are buried without a church service, and as many as 80% of couples are married in the church. Furthermore, during recent years approximately 90% of all fifteen-year-olds have taken part in confirmation training. (Church in Change 2004:47) In fact, the most important reason for belonging to the Lutheran Church for Finns is church ceremonies. A clear majority also finds it also important that the church assists the elderly and infirm, and teaches moral values to children and young people. Even for those who contemplate leaving the church, the rituals and the social work of the church are strong factors in favor of remaining a member. Church ceremonies and welfare activities thus shape people’s view of the church and their relation with it.

From an international perspective, the Finnish system of congregational church social work is an interesting subject owing to its uniqueness. Social work in the church includes a large group of paid workers and has a central position in church law and the church organization. Every parish must by law have at least one social work post. The forms of activity in Finnish church social work range today from food banks to counseling, home visits to various camps, financial assistance to support groups, and so on.2
Today the church social workers themselves hope for more resources for family work and preventive help. They see work with the elderly and children as their particular future challenges. (Kirkko muutosten keskellä 2004) Their work is also appreciated by other profession groups: church employee polls indicate that a majority consider parishes and church associations as having a central role in various societal tasks in the future as well. The need for financial assistance and support for the unemployed is viewed – or rather «wished», one can ask – as declining. (Salonen et al. 2001)

Although the welfare budget of the church of Finland is only a fraction of that of the Finnish state and municipalities, the visibility of the church’s welfare actions is indeed important. This was particularly apparent during the recession of the early 1990s when the non-profit sector, voluntary work and Christian social work were recognized on a larger scale as a chance to fill the gaps in services created by the budget cuts in the public sector. The church reacted quickly, setting up funds to help the overindebted, providing meals, and organizing meeting places and activities for the unemployed. Its employees helped mental-health patients who had been moved to outpatient care. The co-operation between the municipalities, congregations and associations also increased. (Heino et al. 1997:81, 154) Interestingly, the recession caused a significant change in the nature of church social work, the emphasis shifting from work with the elderly and the handicapped to those of working age and those experiencing economic or psychological problems.

With the increasing social services during the recession, the church attained a very visible public role in Finnish society. The rise in church social services was widely reported by the media. At the individual level, this resulted in a more positive public image; while a third of the populace expressed confidence in the church in 1990, almost two-thirds (57%) did so in 2000. The role of church social work is an essential factor in this trust, since more than 90 percent of Finns consider the work of the church with the elderly, the disabled and the young as either important or very important. (Salonen et al. 2001) Interestingly, the very latest figures also indicate that Finns are most dissatisfied with church activities with the unemployed, which seems to indicate their desire for further church action. The positive image of the church among Finns has even increased during recent years. Currently, 77% Finns view the church positively (Gallup Ecclesiastica 2003).

The church has also been active in its societal and ethical statements, especially during the 1990s. For instance, the Finnish bishops have published official statements concerning social ethics and their concern over the need for community-based responsibility. (Hytönen 2003:18) The church has also regularly offered statements on the initiatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, yet on gender issues the Evangelical Lutheran church of Finland has been relatively silent (Sulkunen 2004).

The Lahti parishes also have a lengthy tradition of engaging in social work. Today social welfare work is strongly incorporated into the overall parish strategy of «servings». The written documents summarise this service: «1) we help and support those especially whose distress is the greatest, and who are otherwise not helped, 2) we carry our common responsibility over global Christian welfare work, and 3) we promote rightness and participation in everything.» These aims are very much in line with the
national documents on church social work. (*Missio, Visio, Arvot ja Strategiat* 2004:5, 8–9) There is cooperation with the municipal social authorities at a number of levels, and in various contexts. For instance, the Lahti parish union is the service producer for the municipal afternoon clubs for school children. (*Diakonia- ja yhteiskuntatyön toimintakertos* 2005) The parish union has also employed a church social worker focusing entirely on economic assistance – very rare even in Finland.

Although the number of clients in Lahti church welfare work has been steadily decreasing for a few years (however, their number increased again in 2004), the church social workers indicate that the problems of many of their clients have actually become increasingly difficult. Furthermore, the substance of the client visits in Lahti has altered: the importance of spiritual and faith-related topics as well as human relations has increased, while discussion on money has decreased. (*Diakonia- ja yhteiskuntatyön toimintakertos* 2004) The activities of Lahti church social work as a whole may be considered a significant shaper of public opinion, particularly on issues of altruism and welfare.

Varying expectations concerning the church and welfare

*The views of local public authorities*

It is clearly considered by the local authorities that the church in Lahti indeed has a role to play in the construction of welfare; *both* in providing services *and* in reminding people of their responsibilities over others’ well-being. It is also considered that the welfare work of the church will be increasingly needed in the near future. Outsourcing contracts with the church are, interestingly, not really considered outsourcing of welfare. This seems to reflect a particular «state-church» image, which according to law no longer is the case.

However, providing what is considered «basic services» is clearly seen as a responsibility by the local municipality itself. The welfare role that the church is seen to concern providing, what is considered, «special, practical social welfare services». This means primarily psychosocial services, crisis help, and work with special groups such as the elderly. But why precisely these fields of welfare? The public authorities consider the church representatives to have certain special welfare know-how that is: 1) spirituality and values (especially, values of caring and communality), 2) the ability to encounter people better and more profoundly than other agents, and 3) free-will membership. There seems to be even some idealism in the way that the welfare services of the church are pictured; the church is seen as motivated by «spirituality, love and free will». Furthermore, such idealism was evident in the views emphasizing that where the municipality and church offer similar services (such as counseling), «the church encounters individuals better». Interestingly, the municipal representatives spontaneously offered an even more personal perspective: «If I needed food money for my family, I think I would choose church social work over a municipal agency. -- I feel they work there more based on neighborly love.» (w)
According to the municipal representatives, the church should adopt a clear stance in public welfare debates, even concerning municipal services, but not «patronize and preach». «The church should keep up the voice of the weaker as well as the shared spirit of «not leaving your pal who is in need behind» (m). They understand this public voice as promotion of welfare: maintaining the values of caring and the spirit of solidarity. The church, in their view, is a special expert on this. However, the representatives also noted that it may lose its distance and critical voice on other welfare agents in close active co-operation. Close co-operation may thus be a double-edged sword in this sense.

What, all in all, is then the relation between the welfare activities of the municipality and the church? In those areas of well-being and welfare where the church’s activities are strong, the resources of municipal social work can be reduced; overlapping activities are viewed as unnecessary and avoidable. The fear of many church representatives thus seems to be valid.

The views of the church representatives
The church representatives altogether conclude that the church indeed has a role to play in welfare and people’s well-being, but views on this role vary. Some emphasize evangelizing and spirituality, thinking that the church ideally should incorporate less welfare activities. Many are more positive on welfare activities but consider that the practical social work activities of the church should be temporary, not long-term. Others, however, emphasize that the church must incorporate both spiritual and social work equally. A few even noted that in some instances the social work should be emphasized more than the spiritual activities.

Overall, the church representatives consider that the church should carry the responsibility of those people that no-one else looks after, the weakest. Many interviewees referred to the «invisible misery which the society and municipal aid channels do not reach» (m). The church representatives see, very much in line with the public authorities, that it is the church’s responsibility to remind all people of their personal social responsibilities; the church is considered a promoter of value of caring and communality. «Encountering» was fundamental here: «When people are suffering illness and sickness and despair, they soon lose their participation and link with their parish. We should really encounter them. This spirit should intimately inform our social work» (m).

Interestingly, however, views on the ideal ways to encounter people varied greatly between representatives. Some considered that the church should participate in everyday life as much as possible: for instance, taking part in market-place happenings, participating in neighborhood associations, or simply priests walking around their neighborhoods and offering to assist in car repair or church social workers offering cleaning assistance (gendered care, again). However, some considered the church should encounter people simply through ways involving spirituality or mental help; simply being close to people is not sufficient, and perhaps even harmful. The church should not act as a «show producer or stage manager» (m).
As with the municipal authorities, the public debates on welfare and ethical issues are seen as one part of the church’s social responsibility and welfare activities. However, a few were more against public visibility, or at least further visibility. One pastor (m) noted that «People expect the church to be more obvious in ethical debates. But it is problematic. It may give the wrong impression of the basic message of the church – which is only mercy» (m).

To conclude, the ideal seems to be that the church should be a reactive, flexible part of society providing resources for unexpected needs. Only then might it maintain its social work ideal of being «a prophetic voice, a cry for help, a sort of provocative yell, an exclamation mark that speaks for the quiet ones who do not have a voice» (m) in relation to other actors, specifically the local authorities.

The views of the local population
The views of the local citizens on church welfare activities also vary. Others considered welfare activities an integral part of the church; «Without welfare work the church would be like a barren cow. Sorry for this simile! But without social work the church could not produce spiritual fruits» (m). Others, however, the majority of the local people interviewed for this study, felt that the Church’s role was not – or that it should not have to be – in actual social work. The elderly particularly thought that social work belongs to the municipality: «it means a secure future to know that our society and local municipality is prepared to take care of us entirely, once one’s own strength is not enough» (m).

Notwithstanding where the interviewees stood here, however, they all seemed very positive about the fact that the church has indeed done something to help people in need, filling in the gaps in welfare. Forms of activity in which the church was viewed as having a particular role are social networks and meeting places, overall psychological well-being, and the needs of special groups. Furthermore, the majority consider that church’s ideal role is actually in maintaining societal and individual morality, ethics, and specifically the spirit of caring for one’s neighbors. In this, the citizens are very much in agreement with the public representatives.

Contributing to the public welfare debate is thus seen as the heart of the church’s social welfare responsibility. The citizens interviewed seemed overall very satisfied with the church’s recent nation-wide statements as well as its public visibility and voice. At the local level, even more public statements and discussions on welfare were wanted;

In the longer run, changes in the church have been in the right direction according to the local people, the church having come much closer to the grass-roots level, everyday life concerns, and the needs of ordinary people. Furthermore, the fact that the church today offers its services without asking about people’s faith and level of religiousness it is greatly appreciated by the local people. The church aims, in their view, to assist everyone in their experiences of good life; the church cares.
Reflections of the nature of the church institution

The ideal of the church

What do these expectations suggest concerning the view of an ideal church? Harris (1998:156, 159) has written about the «care catalyst» functions of churches: being able to identify people in need of care. But what should the church do about the needs of care? Should the church offer people the material sustenance, or rather only the bread in the Eucharistic sense? The following picture aims to capture the diversity found in the three categories of Finnish data above concerning the ideals posed at the church:

*Figure 1. Ideal of the church*^3^
church representatives of the data well, mostly priests and vicars. For instance, one church social worker noted: «The fundamental thing must be in spiritual work. If my work and time and energy starts to go more into these practical matters --I have to sort of sit down and start to think whether am I in the right position and place» (w). The two orientations focusing more on helping and social assistance, «agent of altruism» and «aid and grace» were most typical among the church social workers, as well as a few priests. One priest put it: «The helping activity of the church reminds us of the human values of justice and hope and equality. This is true counseling for everyday life!» (m). The church is here pictured as being an expert in caring and human true needs, which legitimizes its welfare activities.

The local official representatives clearly stress the orientation of the «agent of altruism» most in their considerations of the church institutions. Some of the local citizens very much agree, while others emphasize the «mouthpiece of God» orientation much more.

Overall, this four-orientation model seems to coincide with the recent UK study by Smith that found that there are also values and theologies which contradict values of social work and social inclusion in faith-based organizations. There is an implicit dualism that separates the realms of the spiritual and material. Furthermore, the citizen perspective may tend to favor spirituality that does not engage with politics and welfare. (Smith 2004:25) Similarly, the reason why the citizens of Lahti seem to emphasize the welfare responsibility of the municipality (that is the view that «The church should not have to be forced to do this much in actual welfare») more than Finnish citizens on average could be explained by the harsh economic challenges the town has recently struggled with.

My findings also seem to reflect the theological directives found in the welfare work of American churches: scriptural texts, response to God’s love, and compassion. Another similarity was that political involvement was clearly not a preferred option. (Cnaan 2002:240–243) The church must do welfare work and fight for justice, but it should not use party politics.

The intricate, complex existence of the church welfare work

What do the expectations imposed on the welfare role of the church tell us about the unique nature of the church institution and how it is understood? The findings clearly indicate that the church is indeed considered a unique institution in the sense of welfare production. Many elements of this uniqueness have to do with the problematic nature of the church social work itself. Seven particular dilemmas concerning the intricate existence of the church welfare work were evident in the data:

Church social work as a tool?
No church representative seemed to proudly speak spontaneously about the fact that the active social work in the 1990s raised the societal status and image of the church and people’s trust in it. The silent agenda seems to be that the social work must not be
used or viewed as a tool to support one’s status. The church must be ‘a true helper’. Yet this theme was not as simple as that. One priest explained:

Free-rides or money-making?
This brings us to a dilemma in church welfare work; do all church services have to be free of charge? A very clear majority thought yes, but money overall is a difficult matter in church social work. There are, for instance, volunteers working as «substitute mothers», and there have often been dilemmas about whether these are volunteers or not as they earn a small salary and, whether it is right that the church «sells its diaconal work» (w), as the clients have to pay small fee for the service of these «mothers». These issues might not have been debated so much between the church workers, but for those responsible for the forms of activity, these were problematic and difficult issues.

Spirituality or neutrality?
Reading between the lines, the social workers of the church in particular seemed to view spirituality in their work as awkward. They seem to be vacillating between two views: on the one hand, they wish to – and perhaps have to – convince themselves that their work is spiritual work and is a fundamental church activity, on the other hand, they cannot push their spirituality and show it too openly because it does not fit the present-day Finnish culture, particularly in welfare issues. Many questions, and solutions involve this dilemma. For instance, the «substitute mother» services want volunteers who are Christian and have Christian values, but they would not take individuals «whose religiosity was too open and evangelizing-centered, that would push the clients» (w). Another example concerns the food bank: workers are afraid that obvious spirituality would oppress people and drive them away, but the clients should somehow know the service is Christian. The workers had, for instance, included a Takatasku meeting point brochure in the food bags. Similarly to recent findings among USA congregations in the provision of welfare (Cnaan 2002:243), proselytizing does not really feature in the social actions of the church.

Altogether, the church has to balance and legitimize two directions: spirituality as a core element, but not too much of it, or too visibly. The problem here thus seems to be how to organize the activities in a manner that is the most respectful to the recipient of welfare, to each individual.

Dutiful servant or high-spirited pioneer?
Municipal welfare involves the church in the considerable dilemma of whether to act or react? The traditional Finnish church law has pictured church social work as taking care of those of whom nobody else takes care of; searching for extreme need. On the one hand, this is still very much pictured as the ideal today, and practically all interviewees seem to quote this idea almost word by word. On the other hand, church rep-
resentatives view it as reprehensible that the church has to plug the holes in public welfare. An obvious dilemma emerges.

The dilemma seems particularly knotty when one considers that the municipality does not know what the church does (that is, the municipality should definitely not leave some welfare undone because the church does it already), and if need arises, the church would help and assist. This picture, however, seems to conflicts with the ideal (that arising from the data) that the agents should increasingly plan the welfare together, and even act to some extent in co-operation. The dilemma might lead to a cul-de-sac, at least theoretically.

The fragmented church social work
The basic question the basic responsibility in church social work arises in part from this dilemma. One deacon I talked to made the interestingly comment: «we do not know what to offer, and our clients do not know what to seek from us.» There seems to be a dilemma between the flexibility and readiness of church social work to respond to the current lack of welfare that no one else responds to and the need for a ‘clear-menu’ of services - clear for the workers themselves, clients and for co-operation parties.

Shame or glory?
Interestingly, one or two church social workers also pointed out that as church social work is very much work with marginalized people, «it gives this sort of shame, a sort of stigma for the whole of church social work. Then it is our task as church social workers to raise respect for our work in the congregations» (w). It was also noted that higher-level education for church social work in Lahti has brought some general respect for the work, but work remains. The clear message still seems to be: ‘gaining shame or glory… does not matter. We are for the people’.

Free will or shared vision?
There is another exciting dimension of research concerning the autonomy of church social workers. On the one hand, the church social workers are very independent and can plan their work and emphasis according to their interests to some extent. A few church social workers even expressed their concern that if nobody is interested in elderly care in one congregation, the elderly might not get services as good as in the neighboring congregation at all. «Such autonomy might risk the equal welfare of the citizens» (w). On the other hand, the church social workers have very many statutory or rather, habit- and custom based tasks that they might not have at all time to fulfill their personal vision or calling. The shared vision might be felt to concern even the expression of calling. One interviewee noted that «I personally like social work and social assistance but I have learnt here in the parish union that it is a bad thing if we take other’s work as our responsibility. This is the shared view» (w). Furthermore, it was fascinating that a few social workers also noted that there is a clear power dimension to this question of shared vision: «if I organize some public, visible event, there
will immediately be those who will say or wonder what that person thinks of herself. Is she trying to big-note herself?» (w). Could it be that the value of communality and modesty is particularly important in the church context? This seems to be the worry.

Overall, all these dilemmas essentially relate to the spiritual versus social, or evangelizing versus caring dimension of the church. A double agenda constitutes the uniqueness of the church institution.

Discussion

Encountering, solidarity, and the church

To return to the original question: what do these findings tell us about the ideal welfare role of the church institution? The range of the empirical findings could be summarised in one expression, ‘encountering’: expectations of the encountering church. The elements of encountering relate specifically to the spirituality and value-basis of the church, its opportunity to connect with people at a deeper and more holistic level, as well as its opportunity to make itself heard in ethical statements and in promotion of the value of altruism.

This core expectation of an encountering church relates to the maintenance of solidarity in a sociological framework: the construction of communality, the values of caring, and the spirit of altruism. There is clearly a classical durkheimian feel to the expectations of the church, since it is viewed as a servant of shared solidarity. Overall, these high expectations illustrate possible its social integration and societal trust enhancement functions.

But how do these durkheimian visions of communality, solidarity and altruism really relate to the present-day late-modern context? Church institutions can be said to maintain communality and a sense of solidarity – or societal social capital – in three ways, all of which relate to welfare activities (see also Yeung 2004). First, they act as mental as well as actual frames of reference that sustain norms and values. Large institutions play a central role in establishing the social and political atmosphere. Religious contexts maintain moral ideals and values, which may foster communal action and volunteerism, either in the church or other contexts. Second, the church offers venues for communal activities and networks. The notion of social networks in particular is crucial because of the close links indicated in previous research between churchgoing, spending leisure time with one’s congregation members, and volunteering for one’s church. Third, churches are often highly trusted institutions. For instance, the role of church social work is an essential factor in this trust in Finland, since more than 90 percent of Finns consider the work of the church with the elderly, the disabled and the young as either important or very important.

Altogether, churches may still offer a possible reference point for (some) solidarity, communality, and cohesion. This certainly seems to be taking place in present-day Finnish society. However, this solidarity and communality promotion has less to do with a religious sense and more to do with the sense of values and norms of altruism.
and caring. In other words, the fundamental way for the church to maintain norms and values (both its ‘own’ and those of more general altruism) is through its visible, active social work.

Furthermore, in this high expectation of encountering and solidarity-promotion, the Finnish church is clearly seen as an ‘institution of authenticity’. I am relying here on Charles Taylor (1992) who has written about the «Ethics of Authenticity»: as a shared set of norms and values in missing, there is an increasing demand to fulfill oneself, being true to oneself. I would like to ask whether the churches’ welfare actions are seen as an example of an institution where words and deeds meet, good words with good deeds of altruism? The context of a liberalistic social policy and harsher values in particular may inculeate a longing for a countervailing force. Are the individuals of today longing for institutions of authenticity? Are they longing for larger ideological frames, frames of meaning?

*The servant of solidarity in relation to the secularisation narrative*

If solidarity-promotion of the church now has more to do today with the values of altruism and caring than religious issues, how does this relate to the secularization debate? What really makes a church a church what might its societal status be?

In the institutional perspective of secularization – the framework of the church institution – rising welfare activities can indeed be interpreted in different ways. Looking from inside the church, some («mouthpiece of God» and «quiet voice of God», in Figure 1.) consider the increasing welfare activities as an example of possible internal secularization, while others («agent of altruism» and «aid and grace») as increasing the societal influence of the church. To put this into the sociological framework of communication, Luhmannian perspective: from the viewpoint of religious communication welfare activities can be considered either ‘function’ (religion relating to society as a whole; pure religious communication) or ‘performance’ (religion relating to other social systems or subsystems) (Beyer 1994, cf. Luhmann 1982, 1990).4

More importantly, however, what about the perspective of wider communication? That is, what about the societal perspective of secularisation? Two notions are crucial here. First, active social work has taken the church into spheres that were considered to be part of the public sector – either public sector alone (till the late 1980s and during the recession) or almost exclusively (late 1990s and now). Second, from the perspective of societal differentiation, the increasing welfare activities of the church may even be considered attempts to break down such barriers. Analysis of social structures and expectations based on wider societal communication, not merely analysis based on communication of one single institution or sub-system, thus indicate that the increasing welfare role of the church can be considered performance of religion.

These conclusions are not however sufficient to investigate the future of secularisation, and/or possible rising societal role of the church institution further. Let us return to the core of this article. the ideal welfare role of the church institution. The present findings have shown that the social work of the church is considered the area where the teachings of the church are given flesh and blood, becoming a lived reality. They are
the way in which the teaching of altruism may become familiar, even to people who do not participate in church activities. This proposition is underscored by the late modernity context of privatization of religion.

The welfare activities of the church and the high expectations they promote may actually represent what Giddens (1990:83–88, 102) calls access points in late modernity points of connection between lay and professionals that maintain positive image and trust – and in this case also societal trust. The welfare activities are the channel (or ‘language of communication’ as Luhmann puts it) of altruism and solidarity.

The Giddensian ‘access point’ is, however, a two-way street here: on the one hand, the church emphasising its welfare activities (ever since the recession of the early 1990s), and citizens and public authorities expecting the church to promote welfare on the other – and respecting it for doing so. The strong message from the data is that the church (more than many other institutions, perhaps all) with its welfare activities is a place where words and deeds meet. Such a viewpoint, that of a servant of solidarity and of an institution of authenticity, emphasises the holistic nature of the church; the words and deeds of the church going hand-in-hand.

But what about the heart of secularization then; if the ‘access point’ is welfare work, does this refer to internal secularization of the church institution? The present findings suggest that the answer is negative. Even those representing the «the mouthpiece of God» and «the quiet voice of God» orientations did not think that social work should be stopped altogether. Overall, both insiders and outsiders emphasise the strong internal link between spiritual and social aspects. The channel of altruism may then also be a channel of spirituality, at least to some individuals. Since the performance of the church is understood a part of its function, performance builds on function, and function is then further maintained and strengthened through performance.

Altogether, the findings of this study strongly indicate that the welfare and spiritual activities of the church are not and should not be seen as separate frames, languages or narratives. Despite varying emphasis on the spiritual-social continuum, spirituality and caring are seen as reflections of the same core. It is exactly this double agenda that seems to constitute the societal uniqueness of the church institution.

Notes
1 This article is based on the Finnish case study in the WREP project (Welfare and Religion in European Perspective), co-ordinated by DVI, Uppsala. For an introduction to the project and its eight countries, see Welfare, Church and Gender in Eight European Countries, 2004. The core findings that this article presents, in chapters 3.1-3.3 and partly also in 4.1 are similar to those in a few recent publications (Yeung 2006a, 2006b, 2008). However, the focus of this article is novel and its analysis unpublished.
2 Today approximately 21,300 people work in the Church, of whom 45% do parish work while 9% work as diaconal workers. In 2000, the number of priests in the Finnish Lutheran church was 2162 and the number of church social workers as high as 1462. The rest work in administration, cemeteries, etc. The number of diaconal workers increased by 21% between 1999 and 2003.
Seventy percent of the all church employees and 91% of diaconal workers are women. At the turn of the millennium approximately 7% of the population received help and counseling from parish diaconal workers. In 2004, the Church diaconal work had 734,000 contacts. Parishes organized 11,000 occasions for distributing food in which 426,000 people (not included in contacts above) took part. (Kääriäinen 2002; Salonen et al., 2001; Church in Change 2004; Kirkon tilastollinen vuosikirja 2004, 2005) Very recent studies also indicate that the welfare activities of the church at national level do indeed fill the gaps in basic welfare services, e.g., the gaps in subsistence subsidy (i.e., income support) (Juntunen and Grönlund and Hiilamo 2006).

While in most of the cases, the interviewees could easily be described on the four orientations, it was sometimes harder to use the model with the church data. The municipal and citizens viewpoint however could be represented with the model more easily. I also presented the model to a larger group of church social workers in one of their training session in autumn 2004. The feedback was positive and quite enthusiastic. A few noted that the model gave them good tools for thinking about their work environment and the teachings of the church. However, some noted that the dimension are closely interrelated – which of course is true. See also Yeung 2006a.

Beyer extends Luhmann’s sociological theory and two of his arguments specifically. First, Luhmann (1990: 176) sees social systems as based on communication. Secondly, for Luhmann (1982: 229) modernity is characterised not principally by a quantitative increase in differentiation, but by a qualitative change from the dominance of stratified differentiation to that of functional differentiation.

References


Anne Birgitta Yeung: Servant of solidarity, institution of authenticity