Summary

Which ecclesiological perspectives are implied in volunteer ministry? In order to answer this question, we conceptualize four aspects implied in it: the kind of activities preferred by volunteers, their motivation, their inspiration and their perception of the ecclesiastical context in which they work. After analyzing the data collected from a sample of 297 pastoral volunteers in The Netherlands, we formulate, hypothetically, the following ecclesiological conclusion. The conception of the church underlying volunteer ministry implies: communicating, advancing humanity, experientially believing, and religiously interpreting the church’s changing religious functions.

Introduction

In this article, we direct our attention to volunteer ministry as one of the most important pillars supporting the self-actualization of today’s church. We ask the question which ecclesiological aspects are implied in it. First, we would like to locate this question from the perspective of the theory of social systems and its application to the church and to refine it through the distinction between a hierarchical and a communio-oriented ecclesiology (1). After that, we try to conceptualize four aspects which are implied in volunteer ministry, restricting our study to the area of sustaining people who suffer from irreparable loss (2). Then, we describe the sample of volunteers, which we investigated with the help of a questionnaire (3). Further, we report the results of our empirical explorations with regard to the four aspects mentioned (4). Lastly, we try, hypothetically, to draw some ecclesiological conclusions from them (5).

1. Church Identity and Volunteer Ministry

Since Parsons’ analysis of social systems, various social institutions are described through the distinction into four subsystems implied in this analysis. These subsystems are adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency, to which the so-called AGIL-scheme refers (Parsons 1953). Adaptation has to do
with the relationship of the institution under consideration with its environment. It interacts with this environment in terms of its resources, which have to be made available for the survival of the institution. Goal attainment relates to the aims and objectives of the institution and the structures of actions, which direct themselves to achieving these goals. Integration refers to the interaction and communication processes and their norms, by which the institution as a collection of individuals and groups is held together in terms of its cohesion and unity. Latency concerns the existing values underlying the manifest phenomena taking place in the institution from its internal and external relationships. Despite their hidden existence they fulfil the function of legitimizing the institution and all that is going on in it. They are dormant, because they are based on a plausibility structure, by which they are taken for granted.

With the help of this analytical instrument, the internal and external functions of several social institutions may be described and explained such as economic, political, social and cultural institutions — as for instance family and school (cf. Habermas 1982), technological and scientific organizations (Thurlings 1980), social movements (Schreuder 1982) especially peace movements (Van Iersel & Spanjersberg 1985).

This AGIL-scheme can also be applied to the local church, as may be found in the Handbook Of Congregational Studies, although the writers do not refer to Parsons (Carroll, Dudley and McKinney 1988). The four dimensions, which the writers identify as determining the church at the local level, correspond with Parsons' distinction into four subsystems. The four dimensions are context, program, process and identity. Context relates to the societal setting in which the church finds itself, by which it is influenced and upon which it exercises its influence too. It corresponds to Parsons' subsystem of adaptation. Program concerns the structure of purposes and activities, through which the church addresses and responds to people inside and outside the church. It parallels Parsons' subsystem of goal attainment. Process has to do with the dynamics of interaction and communication within the church. It relates to Parsons' subsystem of integration. Lastly, identity refers to the set of beliefs, values and images, which symbolize the church's distinctiveness from other companies, associations and organizations by legitimating its distinctive character. It is similar to Parsons' subsystem of latency.

Neither the four subsystems in the sense of Parsons nor the four dimensions in the sense of the Handbook of Congregational Studies may be interpreted in terms of separate entities. On the contrary, they interact with each other by influencing each other. These mutual causal relationships may be understood as being conscious and unconscious, intended and unintended, functional and dysfunctional, direct and indirect, manifest and latent. Each time one has to make a choice of which kind of relationship between which kind of subsystem or dimension is the subject matter under consideration (Merton 1968).