CARING TOGETHER

The role of the Dutch Reformed Church / Protestant Church of the Netherlands and the responsibilities of the government with respect to reducing poverty

Summary

This paper addresses the following questions:

1. Has the government implemented policies that correspond to its constitutional responsibility to protect those members of society whose economic position is weakest? The government has a legal obligation to perform to the best of its ability.

2. Where is the demarcation line between the government’s constitutional responsibility toward the most economically vulnerable citizens and the tasks of diaconal work? In this, I focus specifically on diaconal work as carried out by the Protestant Church of the Netherlands in its role as successor to the Dutch Reformed Church.

I have considered these questions from a number of perspectives, the first of which is a historical one. In chapters 2 to 5, I set out the development of diaconal work and the relationship between church and state with respect to it, specifically during the period from the origins of the Dutch Republic until the adoption of the national income support legislation on 1 January 1965, with a primary focus on the period after the establishment of the constitution in 1814. Before the income support act was introduced, the onus was on the church and other charitable institutions to provide relief for the poor. At a number of crucial moments, the government’s policies were clearly ill-considered. After 1 January 1965, the issue became primarily one for local government.

Next is the legal perspective, and in chapter 6 I discuss provisions for income support and welfare at the constitutional level. The most important aim of the Social Support Act (Wmo) is the creation of cohesive local policies, carried out by capable municipal bodies and accessible by all citizens, that will facilitate and encourage people’s participation in society. This Act shifts the burden of welfare from local government to civil society, of which the church is a part. In fact, the church was explicitly named as an actor in it during parliamentary debate on the Act. In this way, church social and welfare bodies are given not only tools which will allow them to join in the creation of policy, but also opportunities to take part in the organisation of welfare provisions.

After this, chapter 7 deals with perspectives of politics and policy, including government policy. While it is evident that the government is aware of its responsibilities and that it strives to protect the weakest members of society through its policy choices, various reports have nonetheless illustrated the fact that there are always people who remain needy. A gap divides those who are covered by
the scope of the law and therefore clearly entitled to a benefit or another form of aid, and others who may need help but who either cannot or will not meet the criteria set for that entitlement. For any reason, some people may not wish to have any dealings with a government body; others may not be covered by the scope of the relevant legislation. Still others may not recognise the fact that they need help or they may need some form of immaterial assistance.

From the perspective of diaconal work, chapter 8 deals with policy and chapter 9 with practice. Churches have broadly criticised government policies and legislation. Their recommendations for central and local government include addressing issues with made-to-measure provisions, searching out risk situations and vulnerable groups and providing appropriate support and facilities.

Chapter 10 sets out my answers to the questions above. My conclusion is that government policy has always been aimed at protecting the very weakest in society, and that the government has therefore fulfilled its constitutional duty. Although this satisfies the first question, it is nevertheless the case that there are still people living in poverty in the Netherlands. A 2010 report on poverty showed that churches spent nearly €30 million on care for the poor in 2009, which is undeniably a substantial amount. Diaconal policy developed for a range of areas, along with the projects and activities carried out in connection with that policy, demonstrate huge social capital. At nearly two centuries old, the diaconal structure of the Protestant Church of the Netherlands covers the entire country and is supported by paid and unpaid staff who are inspired by Christian ideals. This is certainly an advantage over secular organisations. In order that their roles be fulfilled, it will be necessary for the Church and the government to fully coordinate their respective positions. This is nothing new: historically, the government has often delegated tasks associated with poverty relief to the church, even subsidising them. Legislation passed in 1854 and 1912 demonstrates this. The difference today is the universal diaconal realisation that poverty must be addressed worldwide, and that churches and religious groups are among the parties responsible for doing so. This is an idea that is both widely supported and also confirmed in countless international agreements. Furthermore, the answer to the first question signals a clearer demarcation between the responsibilities of the government and those of diaconal work. The government’s task ends with the implementation of effective social welfare legislation aimed at resolving poverty; the task of the church begins with the needy who are left behind in spite of that legislation.

The legal and financial issues inherent to diaconal work have become so complex that it is impossible for small or local parishes to deal with them on their own. Diminishing financial resources and the disintegration of organisational structures make cooperation essential.
It will be necessary for the Protestant Church of the Netherlands to organise itself at the local level in such a way as to contribute effectively. This could include participating in a dialogue with local government and creating a sustainable local network for cooperation, either alone or together with other churches. It could also mean participating in debate on the implementation of the Work and Social Assistance Act (Wwb), the Social Support Act (Wmo) or other social insurance legislation. The Wmo offers churches the opportunity to integrate their work into the framework of the Wmo itself, which in turn makes churches more visible and highlights their work. It also allows them to make use of municipal facilities available under the Wmo. For example, they could be granted subsidies for projects or be mandated to offer services that would be reimbursable via a Wmo budget. Furthermore, I believe that local governments can make much more effective use of the enormous social capital that church social welfare work represents, for example by buying in the services that it can offer. Those responsible for budgets need to be alerted to these possibilities.

Finally, churches bear the burden of immaterial care for the acutely or interminably needy when, for whatever reason, the law fails them. For this group, the church is by far the most helpful source of support when people are facing loneliness, poor health, old age and similar problems. A church with pretensions to extend its activities beyond the specific scope of diaconal work overestimates itself and encroaches, in the Netherlands at least, into the territory of the government. But a government with pretensions to take on the specific tasks of diaconal care as described above is equally guilty of overestimation.