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`Set up inter-religious working groups'

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Religious leaders should consider setting up inter-religious working groups at various levels of the community, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said such groups could work to improve mutual understanding by adopting best-practice models from successful experiments where effective local and national mechanisms had been established for inter-communal communication, awareness and acceptance of other beliefs.

"Sensitivity to the beliefs of others must prevail ... Islam makes it clear that we must accept that others will believe in their own beliefs, worship in their own way.

"Just as Muslims must accept rights of others to their own faith, others too must accept and respect the rights of Muslims as Muslims," he said when opening the 11th World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) Assembly here today.

Also present were his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, WEF chairman David Detert and WEF international director Rev Dr Jun Vencer.

Representatives from more than 80 nations are taking part in the assembly which ends on May 10.

Dr Mahathir said religion should unite not only people of the same faith, but all of humanity, whether they were of the same faith or not.

"Religion should make people in the East brothers to people in the West; a white man brother to the black man.

"It should make the believers merciful and kind to all human beings, even if that person subscribes to a different faith."

He said if religious intolerance was allowed to spread unabated, it would spell disaster for mankind.

"Our religions have promoted human rights thousands of years ago, but it is because we have forsaken the teachings of our religion that we now have to re-discover human rights."

Dr Mahathir said the younger generation should also be the target of a consistent effort to protect and preserve religious tolerance.

The other vital role of religion in the post-modern age, he said, was to ensure harmony in society by not knowingly and blatantly sowing the seeds of discord.

"We should be careful that we don't propagate religions at the cost of conflicts and violence."

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