

'Don't punish church protesters, educate them'

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The Sabah Council of Churches (SCC) said protesters of the Taman Medan church should not be punished, but instead the government must carry out their duty to foster better understanding among religions.

"Rather (than punitive action), we believe that the government also has a greater and more onerous, moral duty to foster greater understanding among all Malaysians.

"Incidents such as this usually stem from ignorance, and ignorance breeds hatred," said SCC president Jerry Dusing (left).

Dusing said they were "saddened by the ignorance" of the protesters, who gathered outside the Petaling Jaya church last Sunday to demand it remove the cross displayed outside its shop lot premises.

The incident sparked an outcry for the government to act against what they called religious provocation, citing recent amendments to the Sedition Act.

Meanwhile Dusing said the council found the protest "disturbing".

"We are disturbed, because we believe that this latest episode of religious tension is a symptom of the deterioration of religious harmony in Malaysia.

"Never before has our multiracial and religiously diverse nation faced so much anger and intolerance," said Dusing.

'Punishment stokes more hate'

"The fact that the true meaning of the sacred symbol of our Christian faith could be distorted in this manner, shows just how deeply the mistrust and misunderstanding have developed among us.

"This - above everything else in this unfortunate episode - truly fills our hearts with sorrow," he said, but added punishing the protestors would not solve the fundamental problem of religious and racial polarisations.

"We therefore believe that it is counter-productive to penalise ignorance with the law.

"Humiliation would only breed more hatred. Rather, we trust that if the protestors were to understand the true meaning of the cross - regardless of whether they agree with the rest of the Christian faith or not - they would not perceive it as anything other than a symbol of the love and mercy of God," said Dusing.

On Tuesday Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak finally issued a statement berating the protesters – among them members of the area's Umno division - and said the police would investigate the incident.

Meanwhile the Selangor government has informed the church involved it can restore its cross explaining that as of 2008, places of worship are allowed to operate in commercial units without permits as long as the state committee on non-Islam affairs is notified.

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