

**Religious leaders say nothing wrong with Muslims receiving Christian aid**  
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**By Clara Chooi**

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 21 — Muslim and Christian leaders agreed today that all religious institutions should help the needy regardless of their religious beliefs, said exploitation of their desperation for aid to proselytise should be rejected.

The stance was established this evening when the leaders, including Perlis Mufti Dr Juanda Jaya and Council of Churches Malaysia general secretary Reverend Dr Hermen Shastri, huddled together at a closed-door function here in a forum to discuss the role of religious institutions in disbursing help to the needy.

The touchy subject of impoverished Muslims turning to Christians for help has been raging on for weeks, possibly adding strain to inter-religious ties in Malaysia although the country recently established diplomatic relations with the Roman Catholic church.

The row first exploded when the Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC) in Petaling Jaya was raided by religious authorities investigation a proselytisation complaint. It later exacerbated when allegations surfaced that Christian organisations have been attempting to lure impoverished Muslims into the religion by offering them aid.

Pro-Umno newspapers have been highlighting the issue of late, beginning with Utusan Malaysia's report on a Christian conspiracy to usurp Islam. In the latest twist to the saga, a tuition centre accused of trying to convert Muslim schoolchildren to Christianity was ordered shut after the Malay daily highlighted the allegations last week.

But today's forum participants disagreed that religion should stand in the way of an individual's need for welfare, noting that all faiths preach extending assistance to the less fortunate. Such assistance from religious bodies, they said, should not be politicised but should instead be promoted extensively to inform the needy that such help is available.

The leaders however sighed over the lack of communication between the country's different religious communities, repeatedly pointing out that such inter-religious matters should not have to be discussed in such a clandestine manner. The forum, organised by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas), was held in a small function room at Hotel Midah here and saw the participation of a group of religious leaders, civil society representatives and handpicked media organisations.

"We are of the same opinion that the issue of poverty should be tackled by all, especially the religious institutions. But programmes to help the poor should be better organised. More importantly, whatever activity that involves the congregation of different religious communities should be done in a more open and transparent manner, in a manner that shows respect for one another," Dr Juanda (picture) said.

He noted that the disbursement of zakat funds reach even the non-Muslims, adding that a recipient does not need to embrace Islam to receive aid.

"It is given in order to reduce hostilities between religions. If a non-Muslim needs help, it is right to give them help. And I believe that when a person needs help, when they are in desperate conditions, they will accept it from anyone," he told the forum.

Dr Juanda added that on the ground, relationships between the different religious communities have always been cordial and harmonious but lamented that unfounded fears that the issue could heighten religious tension have quelled open discourse.

"These issues can be resolved quickly and should be so that all misconceptions can be cleared immediately. Programmes like this forum should be held often so that no matter what happens, we can always contact one another directly to get information," he said.

When the topic of proselytisation was raised, Hermen said that should such activities occur, there are appropriate laws that can be used but stressed that the acts of "one or two persons" should not be used to demonise the entire religion.

He agreed that certain sects may choose to proselytise the needy by offering assistance in return but said this was not done after consultation with the church.

"If someone says — if you want charity, you must convert — we do not condone it. So if that happens, then those persons must face the consequences. But we cannot characterise the whole religion just because one or two persons do it," he said.

Hermen said response to help offered by the church varies between different individuals, with some feeling "drawn" to the religion after receiving the assistance.

"But, we do not make it a condition that a person must be Christian first before receiving charity. Never a condition that they should become a member of our faith," he stressed.

Dr Maszlee Malik of Universiti Islam Antarabangsa said better networking and cooperation among the religious communities is needed to tackle such sensitive matters, adding that certain incidents are better kept out of the media.

"It helps that there is substantial communication between one another and I think alot of issues, like what we have now, could be solved behind the media or even, without going to the core or diving into legal issues," he said.

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