

Don't blame church for helping poor Muslims, says Asri
The Malaysian Insider
August 25, 2011
By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 25 — Influential cleric Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin said today that Muslims should take care of their own poor instead of accusing Christians of proselytising when the church helped poor Muslims.

The former Perlis Mufti said that he met one of the 12 Muslims who attended a thanksgiving dinner at Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC) and found that she was a single mother with three children who turned to the church after difficulties in obtaining help from the zakat, or Islamic tithe office.

"What is so strange about that? That is what people who are serving God do. What is so strange if the church teaches Christian values when that is what a church does," the maverick scholar said.

Tensions between Christians and Muslims have been heightened after the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (Jais) swooped down on DUMC several weeks ago, claiming to be investigating a complaint that Muslims were being converted at a dinner the church was hosting for a local NGO.

Umno-owned Utusan Malaysia also reported that poor Muslims living in squatters near Jalan Kelang Lama were also being proselytised by Christians claiming to be giving free English classes.

But Asri (picture) said today that blaming the church was the easy way out.

"We accuse them as the cause of everything. Then we demonstrate and inflame the public to rise up against the church for its welfare activities and 'evangelism.'

"But we who did not help or preach do not need to be faulted. So that people forget our mistakes, we blame all sin on others," he said.

He said that such a move was like a rich family where one member runs away to a neighbour because of a lack of attention, protection and food but the neighbour offers all the help that is needed.

"Is burning down the neighbour's house or arresting and punishing the neighbour for influencing our family member the only solution we can suggest? At the same time, we do not question the responsibility that we have abdicated all this while," he wrote in a statement today.

He added that the zakat office should be more sincere in helping poor Muslims instead of letting them beg for sympathy from the church.

"Some zakat officers... make applications difficult and complicated. Those asking for alms are treated like beggars. Give them the zakat as it is their right.

"In fact, zakat can be given to non-Muslims. If it functions this way, then non-Muslims will be attracted to Islam. If it doesn't function well, then even Muslims will want to leave

Islam," he said.

The Selangor state government met with both Jais and representatives of the Harapan Komuniti NGO today in hopes of resolving the debacle which has seen the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) administration come under fire from both Muslims and Christians.

The Malaysian Insider

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