Building Communities of Peace through the Multicultural Ministry of the Church

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Recently the Council of Churches in Malaysia concluded a national conference of indigenous church leaders that was held in Ipoh, in the state of Perak, from 27-30 August 2007. It brought together over 100 participants representing the various indigenous communities from peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak.

Speaking about the plight of the "Orang Asli" (the 18 aboriginal groups that make up 0.06% of the total population of 23 million in Malaysia), Rev. Bah Serani, from a local university, who himself belonged to a small indigenous community, had this to say: "I am afraid, as our country celebrates its fiftieth year of independence, we from the Orang Asli community have little to celebrate about. We are an alienated people in our own land. Our ancestral land is under threat of possession by others. Our culture is vanishing and our children are not able to speak our language."

This incisive remark captures the sad reality of a minority community, who as a result of encroachment of outsiders into their living space has caused a threat to their cultural existence. Their experience is definitely not the exception but the rule for many minority indigenous communities throughout Asia.

At this Consultation you will be dealing with the subject of multiculturalism, and from insights to be drawn from participants from different countries, you will be able to arrive at conclusions of how effective churches are in working in and with issues of multiculturalism.

Allow me to make a couple of points to stimulate your thinking on this matter.

First, a working definition on "Multiculturalism" is used to describe demographic conditions of ethnic and cultural diversity where it occurs. This implies, of course, that people representing different cultural and religious traditions are living together in close proximity and over years of interaction, they are able to borrow practices from one another.

In many parts of Asia, we are able to see such kind of multicultural coexistence among peoples. In some situations, because the cultural interaction has existed for centuries, people are able to live together in relative peace. In other situations, we see a deterioration of multicultural existence due to internal or external political pressures.

There is also a modern dimension to multiculturalism in that countries that once used to

be largely monocultural are now having to contend with multiculturalism through the advent of migrant communities who over the years have settled to become citizens. Social tensions often emerge as minority communities react to the perceived imposition of social integration policies by the dominant population and making its cultural status as normative for the country.

Therefore, as we deal with the social reality of multiculturalism, it is important that we draw a distinction between the positive and negative aspects of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a positive feature of society when people are able to celebrate cultural diversity, show acceptance and respect for one another's traditions. It is negative when the dominant population imposes its will upon others, and represents a melting-pot point of view, where the minority should seek to assimilate themselves into the fold of the majority.

From the history of missions, we know that the church had sometimes played a positive role and, at other times, missions had a very detrimental effect on cultures. When missions were carried out under the structures of colonialism in the past, for example, the cultural heritages of the people were robbed and pressure was placed on the people to opt for a "western and Christian" cultural life-style. In the midst of the many negative effects, we can also point to examples where Christian missions preserved the language of the people, fought for the rights of minority groups, and brought education to women and thereby empowering them to participate meaningfully in tribal cultures, or, in modern societies.

In the Bible, we learn from Paul's own missionary experiences, that although he was critical of the dehumanising effects of some aspects of culture on people, he never advocated the disappearance of cultures other than his own. In fact, his conversion to Christianity caused him to realise that all people are God's children and there should be no barriers erected in living together, except for the dehumanising aspects in any culture that destroy lives.

As he writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17 onwards, in Christ, cultures are to be renewed according to the righteousness of God and God has given to the church a message and ministry of reconciliation, through Christ, so that different cultural communities can live in peace with one another. On this basis, Paul justified his ministry among non-Jews, and called upon the Apostle to receive the gentile churches as equals in the one body of Jesus Christ.

Multiculturalism - the Malaysian experience

Since you are meeting in Malaysia, you should deliberate on Malaysia's experience with multiculturalism to enrich your consultation. Allow me to share my perspective on this matter.

The Malay Peninsula had a long history of inter-cultural contact between different cultural civilizations that existed in Asia. Trade and commerce and colonialism brought different people to its shores. This, over time, influenced the ethnic and religious composition of the country. Malays remained the majority population, displacing the aboriginal communities in the peninsula, but with the welcome offered by the British colonial government to

Chinese and Indian migrants to settle in the country, the cultural mosaic of the country also began to change.

By the time the country was ready to assert its independence, the Malays, seeing their demographic position greatly diminished, negotiated a social contract with the Chinese and Indian communities, and together they sought independence from the British in 1957. The spirit of that contract is reflected in the existing Federal Constitution, stipulating that all races shall enjoy citizenship in the country, but the majority population, made up of Malays, their status, culture and religion (Islam) shall be protected and enjoy a special status.

Since independence till this present day, politics in Malaysia is racial-based, and multicultural tolerance is achieved by building consensus between political parties when dealing with issues deemed sensitive.

Multicultural relations came to a head, when as a result of racial riots on May 13, 1969, the government took bold measures of introducing a new economic policy to "socially engineer" the restructuring of society with the aim to reducing economic disparities between the majority Malays and the rest. In the last 30 years the socially engineered pluralist policies of the government have come under political pressure by the growing assertion of Muslims to pursue an Islamist agenda and turn Malaysia into an Islamic State. This has further alienated the other races, and the racial divide between the "bumiputra" (original and definitive people of Malaysia) and the "non-bumiputras" (the Chinese, Indians and other migrant groups), and between Muslims and other religious communities, continues to grow.

In such a situation, the churches have come to a realization that in order to check the growing polarisation between the cultural and religious groups, an alternative form of multiculturalism as state ideology needs to be advocated. Along with Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Taoists and NGOs and civil pressure groups, the churches advocated the idea of "constitutional pluralism" arguing that the spirit of the independence constitution was to inculcate multiculturalism in national life, while at the same time, the fundamental rights and civil liberties of every citizen is enshrined and guaranteed in that same document. It would be anybody's guess, whether multiculturalism will survive in Malaysia in the spirit of 1957, as the country rapidly progresses and the different races fight for a portion of the "economic cake" of development and modernization.

The theme of your consultation stresses the importance of "empowering" the powerless and building "solidarity" among the marginalised and oppressed within cultural communities and in the relationship between majority and minority communities. Our pursuit of just relations between races, cultures and religions must be a common search of all in society in establishing the essential values that can sustain a plural society. Belief in democracy, equal rights for all citizens under the law, respect for shared heritage, and the celebration of diversity, are crucial aspects in this task.