THE
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Office of the
General Secretary

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Bishop Dr Solomon RAJAH
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia
Bishop Dr Lip Tet Thomas TSEN
Basel Christian Church of Malaysia
Rev. Jensey MOJUIN
The Protestant Church in Sabah
Bishop Aaron YAP
Lutheran Church in Malaysia

Geneva, 5 November 2013

Dear Bishop Rajah, dear Bishop Tsen, dear Rev. Mojuin, dear Bishop Yap

Grace and peace to you!

We in the Lutheran World Federation are deeply troubled at the recent ruling of the Court of Appeal of Malaysia that a Roman Catholic Christian weekly publication may not use the Malay-language word for "God", "Allah". This ruling, in our view, goes against the centuries-old, well-accepted use of the word "Allah" by Arab Christians in the Middle East and other parts of the world; violates the freedom of religion and freedom of expression of Christians in Malaysia; and threatens to create unnecessary division and discord between Christians and Muslims in Malaysia.

One of us, LWF President Munib Younan, is the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, an Arabic-speaking Christian church with its head office in the holy city of Jerusalem. In my church, and indeed throughout the Arabic-speaking Christian world, we use the name "Allah" in our Bible, in our worship, in our prayers and in our publications. Christians have been using the word "Allah" for 2,000 years, even before the advent of Islam. If we, the Arab Christians, can use the word "Allah" in the heart of the Muslim and Arab world, peacefully and without any controversy, it is very difficult for me to understand why Malaysian Christians cannot use it.

In addition, we understand that the word "Allah" has been used by Christians in the Malay language for centuries. Similarly, it has long been used in the neighboring Indonesian language, without any conflict or controversy.

The attempt to ban the word by which Malay-speaking Christians refer to God is a fundamental violation of freedom of religion and of freedom of expression. The right to freedom of religion is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It includes the "freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest [one's] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." If Malay-speaking Christians would be

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forbidden to address God as “Allah,” then their teaching, practice, worship and observance would no longer be free.

Similarly, the right to freedom of opinion and expression is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This right “includes freedom to hold opinions without interference”. For centuries, Malay-speaking Christians have held the opinion that the word for “God” is “Allah.” The Court of Appeal’s ruling interferes with these opinions of the Malay-speaking Christians, and with their actual practice.

We understand that these fundamental rights of freedom of religion and freedom of expression are also enshrined in the Constitution and laws of Malaysia.

Furthermore, we are astonished that the Court of Appeal asserts that it, as a secular national court, has the authority and competence to rule on what is or is not “an integral part of the faith and practice of Christianity.” This is a clear interference in matters of faith and religion.

Lastly, we are deeply concerned that this attempt to restrict the use of the word “Allah” to a particular religious group—in this case, Muslims—will lead to increased division and discord among the population of Malaysia. With all respect to the Court of Appeal’s finding that the usage by Christians of “Allah” will “inevitably cause confusion within the community,” it is in fact the attempt to suppress freedoms (in this case, freedoms of religion and expression) that may lead to confusion, resentment, and discord. As the LWF Council has noted (Geneva 2013), while religious intolerance is a source of violence and suffering, religious freedom provides a source and basis for peaceful co-existence.

Examples from around the world show that “the welfare of the community” is best served by promoting human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes this point in its opening words: “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”.

Know that you and your churches, and indeed all the churches and all the people of Malaysia, are in our thoughts and prayers. We pray that you may practice your faith freely, that the rights of all Malaysians will be protected, and that your country may be one of freedom, justice and peace.

Yours in Christ,

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