World Council of Churches

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Archbishop John Ha Tiong Hock
President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei

Rev. Dr Hermen Shastri
General Secretary, Council of Churches of Malaysia

Geneva, February 27, 2014

Dear Brothers in Christ,

Freedom of religion and belief for all, and inter-religious dialogue and cooperation between faith communities, are essential foundations for social cohesion and human dignity and rights in all countries. The World Council of Churches has therefore been deeply concerned by recent developments that jeopardize these fundamental values and the long history of multi-religious co-existence in Malaysia.

The October 2013 Malaysian Court of Appeal's decision forbidding the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims is an emblematic expression of these troubling developments. As I noted in my letter of 13 January 2010, Christians in majority Muslim countries all over the world – including in Malaysia itself, as well as in neighbouring Indonesia – have for centuries used the Arabic word "Allah" to refer to God. Indeed, the shared used of this word by Muslims and Christians alike has served as an important bridge for inter-religious dialogue when speaking of the divine, and in the ongoing dialogues between Christians and Muslims on the global level in which WCC has been engaged, the use of the word Allah has never been contested.

As members of the family of Abrahamic faiths, Muslims and Christians share a common belief in the unity of God, and a common theological thread of love of God and love of neighbor has been central to interfaith relations in societies where these faiths co-exist. Sadly, the recognition of this shared heritage and current need is obscured by this regrettable legal precedent and the political discourse that surrounds it. I share the concern expressed by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, that this case may have far-reaching implications for religious minorities in Malaysia, and the region.

I am therefore writing to express the World Council of Churches' solidarity and support in your efforts to address this challenge and to restore the example of Malaysia's multi-religious society, through an application for leave to appeal against the court's decision, due to be heard on 5 March. The constructive resolution of this matter will be an important signpost along the way of our 'pilgrimage of justice and peace' in the wider world.

I pray that the application and the arguments supporting it will find favour with the court, and that your efforts and ongoing witness for justice and human dignity will help secure the common future of all Malaysians.

Yours in Christ's love,

Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit
General Secretary