

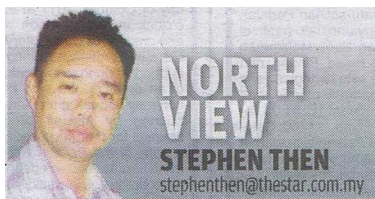
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Joy in inter-faith cooperation

Charity will not be charity if we focus only on helping people of our own race and religion.



SITI Rashidah, aged five years, from Kampung Padang Kerbau, Miri, suffers from cerebral palsy. She cannot walk, talk or eat solid food and has no control over bowel movements.

Her father Drahman Latep and mother Hamdia Bujang are ageing and they are poor and cannot afford the nearly RM800 needed to care for Siti every month.

After Siti's plight was highlighted by *The Star* last year, concerned Christians helped to sponsor Siti's diapers and food supplement every month while the Buddhist Tzu Chi group in Miri came forward to sponsor RM200 worth of milk powder for Siti every month.

The kind contributors are still doing it until today, yet Drahman, Hamdia and Siti are still Muslims. They have not converted to either Christianity or Buddhism.

None of the Christians or Buddhists who are helping Siti and her parents have attempted to convert them either. They have established friendship with Siti and her parents out of love and compassion for Siti.

Mail Tuah, 63, from Kampung Lambir along KM8 of the Miri-Lambir highway, is suffering from stomach cancer. He is also wheelchair-bound due to polio he suffered when he was a child.

Mail has a big hole in his stomach following an operation he underwent to remove a huge cancerous lump in his abdomen. That hole is where a tube is connected into his intestines, to suck out faeces and urine because Mail's bladder system has failed.

Mail has no work and he lives alone. He has welfare aid of RM300 a month, enough for him

to buy food. The people who buy him food are a Muslim couple.

His adult diapers and medical apparatus, however, are given free to him every month by the Tzu Chi volunteers.

Mail also gets visits from a very close Christian friend whom he has known for the past 11 years. This Christian friend would buy him other personal items every time Mail needed them.

Mail today is still a Muslim. He has not converted to Christianity or Buddhism.

Asiah Abdullah, 53, is a blind woman dumped by her daughter. A group of kind-hearted individuals who have been helping her are made up of Christians, Buddhists and Muslims. But Asiah has not deviated from her faith either.

The people who help her, though from different faiths, have no interest in converting her to their own faith. They simply care for her out of compassion.

I have realised that here in Miri, there is tremendous joy and satisfaction in interfaith cooperation between people of different religions whose sole purpose is to bring some relief to the suffering of the needy.

I am raising this issue because over the past week, there was a furore in Selangor where a church was raided after the Christians there invited 12 Muslim friends to join them for a thanksgiving dinner to celebrate a successful fundraising campaign for HIV/AIDS awareness.

The awareness campaign was carried out jointly by the church and non-governmental bodies, including some Muslim organisations.

But Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor officials who initiated the raid claimed that they had also received complaints that Christians from the church were also giving monetary aid to poor Muslims and that this was a form of trying to convert the Muslims.

The person who endorsed the raid was an executive councillor from the Selangor state government, a position similar to a state minister in Sarawak.

That Selangor state exco, Hassan Ali, defended the raid and went on to say that he also

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believed there was a subtle attempt to convert Muslims by the church people.

It is indeed very difficult for us in Sarawak to understand such form of twisted logic that these peninsula politicians hold on to.

The way they think sometimes defies simple wisdom. It is literally starting a fire for no reason.

I have been working with Buddhists and Muslims friends here in Miri to help the poor, single mothers, handicapped and blind folk for more than a decade. The people whom we help are Malays, Ibans, Chinese and also others of mixed-ethnicity.

There was never any allegations from the people we helped, or from the state religious authorities or from the Welfare Department that the help we are giving to these needy folk is because of ulterior motives.

In fact, right now, there are several cases of Muslim single mothers who are desperately in need of food every week because the RM300 given them every month by the State Welfare Department is not enough to pay for their utility bills, food, school bus fees and other daily needs.

I have personally referred several cases to Jabatan Agama Islam Miri for them to help also and the officials there have never accused me of trying to convert these needy Muslim single

mothers.

The controversy in Selangor is just one of a number of such incidents that happened regularly over the years in the peninsula.

How fortunate for us in Sarawak that we do not have such type of politicians here in the state administration.

In Sarawak, generally speaking, charity is looked at simply as it is – a pure and sincere effort to help a fellow being who is suffering, regardless of his or her religious and racial background.

Charity will not be charity if we only focus on helping the people from our own religion and race. The Good Samaritan is the one who helps someone who is in distress without taking into consideration his religious affiliation, nationality, colour, creed, language or caste of the person he is helping.

The Good Samaritan acts out of love and nothing else. No selfish motive, no personal gains. In fact, from personal experience, I can safely testify that the joy of unconditional charity is enhanced multi-fold if we carry out the task with people from different faiths.

This inter-faith cooperation can bring a great sense of inner fulfilment. No material reward can offer such satisfaction.

It will be very sad if the furore in Selangor dampens such inter-faith cooperation.