



National Council of Churches of Singapore

新加坡基督教全国教会理事会

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திருச்சபைகளின் தேசிய மன்றம்

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Dear Members and Friends of NCCS,

Dialogue with Minister K Shanmugam on “Terrorism and Radicalisation in Southeast Asia and Our Challenges”

Greetings in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ!

The NCCS leadership would like to share with you the salient points of the dialogue with Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law K Shanmugam, and to encourage you to disseminate this statement to members of your congregation, if it is deemed appropriate.

- 1 On 9 February 2018, Minister K Shanmugam had a closed-door dialogue with more than 200 pastors and church leaders on the threat of terrorism and the challenges facing Singapore at Orchard Parade Hotel. The audience also included non-NCCS members representing the Baptist and Bible-Presbyterian churches as well as senior clergy of the Roman Catholic Church.

This meeting was organised by NCCS, after discussions with the Ministry of Home Affairs.

- 2 In his wide-ranging dialogue, which lasted some two hours, Minister Shanmugam spoke of trends showing increasing politicisation of religion, religious extremism and radicalisation in Southeast Asia. These developments have serious implications for the peace and stability in the region, especially the harmonious co-existence of the different faith communities.

Of particular concern is the continuing threat of ISIS as the terrorist group looks beyond the Middle East to regions like Southeast Asia, after suffering setbacks in Syria and Iraq. ISIS is reaching out to Bahasa-speaking populations in this region, using inflammatory propaganda materials to recruit potential supporters.

ISIS has declared its East Asia division centred in Southern Philippines. Minister Shanmugam cautioned that the Marawi conflict in Southern Philippines – which lasted from May to October last year – has serious ramifications in Southeast Asia, as militants seeking to establish new fronts outside the city may take advantage of porous borders to infiltrate neighbouring countries.

- 3 At the same time, there are signs of growing religious extremism, with more youths being drawn to embrace violence, based on a distorted view of Islam. Several events in the region have sparked religious and ethnic tensions, and radical Islamist groups like Hizbut Tahrir have used the events to advance their own political agendas. There were tensions created by violence against innocent Muslims as well.

Foreign preachers like Zakir Naik and Ismail Menk have promoted segregationist and extremist views in the region. If these views take root, common spaces will shrink and different segments of the community will drift apart. That will then create conditions for intolerance and violence.

- 4 All these developments have impact on Singapore. We are not immune from the threat of religious extremism and terrorism. The Government has taken a multifaceted approach to these issues.

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First, it has increased its ability to deal with the direct threats of attacks. In 2016, the Police introduced the Emergency Response Teams (ERTs) and the Rapid Deployment Troops (RDTs), to enhance its counterterrorism response. These troops, together with existing Gurkha and special forces are trained to deal with terrorist attacks. The counterterrorism forces will be further strengthened.

Second, there are measures, both legislative and government policies, to promote greater integration, and to try and deal with threats to social and religious harmony in our nation-state. The Minister spoke about these.

The Government has also started 'SGSecure', a national movement to sensitise, train and mobilise the community to help prevent and deal with a terrorist attack. It is suggested that church leaders proactively encourage their members to download the 'SGSecure App', which will allow members to receive important alerts in the event of major emergencies. Members are also encouraged to equip themselves with emergency preparedness skills, such as CPR-AED and First Aid.

The Government also works closely with grassroots communities on initiatives such as the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs) and the National Steering Committee (NSC) on Racial and Religious Harmony – a national platform for ethnic/religious leaders and national leaders to discuss strategies to strengthen racial and religious harmony.

- 5 Minister Shanmugam also clarified an inaccurate impression created by a press report. The press report was on a speech at an international conference organised by Muslim NGOs (Jamiyah-ISESCO Conference), held on 13 October 2017. According to a report published by TODAYOnline on the same day, Minister Shanmugam had said in his speech that 'there are passages there [i.e. in the Bible] that invite Christians to go out and kill non-believers'.

The NCCS had expressed concern that such a statement would misrepresent the Bible and Christianity.

- 6 Minister Shanmugam explained that the impression created was inaccurate, and shared the context for his remarks. He had been speaking to Muslim leaders about the charging of an Imam in 2017. The Imam had made a public supplication during Friday prayers, which on the face of it could be divisive, between Muslims, Christians and Jews. And if not contextualised, some who heard it could believe that it supported violence towards Christians and Jews.

After the news of the Imam's prayer became public, some had suggested that such a supplication was acceptable, because it was based on tradition, and that the Imam was therefore entitled to repeat the statements. Minister Shanmugam had responded by saying that whether based on tradition, or even if it was in scripture, such statements had to be contextualised to our situation, and our community. The statements should not be cited without explanation, and if they were cited without proper explanation, they could be misconstrued and cause harm. He said that there are passages in the religious texts of different religions which on the face of it, could be seen as calling for violence and intolerance. However, religious leaders will usually contextualise them. The minister is of the view that the greater goal of religion is the spirit of humanity, compassion and tolerance.

It was in this context that Minister Shanmugam had mentioned the "destroy" ("haram") passages in the Bible (e.g. in Deuteronomy) as an example of these passages. He went on to say (as quoted in the press report):

"[Don't] the teachings have to be contextualized to a modern environment... In the Bible, there is such a text, but the religious leaders will have to look at it and say, I need to be careful about this and contextualise it for my audience, rather than simply state it as a fact."

- 7 The Minister acknowledged that Christians had always understood that the "destroy" passages contained occasional commands that were specific to a historical context. These passages are treated contextually by pastors; that such commands are not a divine sanction or universal principle to justify violence by Christians against non-believers. The same principle should apply to all religions. Similar passages, verses, traditions can be found in other religions and they have to be dealt with in the same way.

Minister Shanmugam said he also knew NCCS's position on this issue – that the mainstream teaching of the Church is governed by the teachings of Jesus Christ. In their relationships with people of other faiths and in situations of hostility, Christians are to 'Love your neighbour as yourself' and 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'

These points made by Minister Shanmugam are helpful and appreciated by our Christian community. They help clarify the original news report which did not contain the background; some quotes were more prominent, and gave a misleading impression of what had been said.

- 8 In his closing remarks at the meeting, NCCS President Bishop Rennis Ponniah highlighted that both the Government and religious leaders have their respective roles and shared responsibility in seeking the welfare of the nation. The Minister's initiative in calling for this meeting with pastors and church leaders, his careful depiction of the current scenario facing Singapore as well as his openness to the feedback from NCCS on his reported statement, reflect the healthy relationship and communication between the Government and religious leaders of the different faiths. This augurs well for the uniquely challenging times that are already upon our nation. Sound policies and concerted effort at all levels of society are needed to contain and overcome inter-religious tensions. Church leaders will endeavour to do their part together with other religious leaders and the Government, to pursue the common good for the people of our land.
- 9 This dialogue with Minister Shanmugam has been very useful as a timely reminder that we live in a period of heightened threats to safety and security. There are developments and realities of concern in the region and in our neighbouring countries. Christians must therefore do their part to preserve the peace and stability that we have enjoyed thus far, by building trust among the different racial and religious groups in Singapore and by participating in initiatives such as the IRCCs and SGSecure.

Conclusion

In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, we read: 'First of all, then, I urge that supplications, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way'.

Let us pray for our Government leaders – and especially for the work of MHA – as the Government leads this country that we all love in these challenging times. Let us pray that God will grant them wisdom, good judgment and sensitivity.

And let us pray that God will protect all who live and work in Singapore, that Christians will be responsible in their use of religious freedom and that the Church will be faithful in serving the nation with the love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Yours Sincerely in Christ,



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