

## CORRUPTION AND INTEGRITY. A CALL TO CHURCHES IN MALAYSIA

*Margaret Chen, Malaysia*

Ordinary people in the country find themselves unable to do business or other things in the ordinary ways. They are compelled to pay ‘incentives’ to get people to do the things they want. They are told extraordinary things about corruption in the high echelons of business and politics, especially where the two people meet. The thought of people being comfortable with the concept of being corrupt is frightening, especially since the systems – both in public service and on the free market – are actually workable. But more alarming than the corruption level is the acceptance level. More and more Malaysians are living with it as if it were a natural part of life. In the past and today, everyone is giving, everyone is taking, and that is how things move in this country.<sup>1</sup> Corruption has become an issue of national importance.

### **1. The Promotion of Ethical Values and Integrity**

Ever since Malaysia elected its new Prime Minister, Dato Seri Abdullah Badawi, we have heard about war on corruption and inefficiency. Prime Minister Badawi has promoted good governance and ethical values, as well as the fight against corruption<sup>2</sup> as central pillars of the country and his administration. This promotion was based on: a) awareness and understanding of the current drives of global economic, political and social systems; and b) the desire of the Malaysian government that the cabinet be accountable to the parliament, and be trusted, reliable and with integrity.

The global economy needs to maintain a good system of governance in the public and private sectors, and a greater accountability and transparency to fight corruption. The government sees corruption as a practice which enables someone to obtain remuneration through illegitimate means, giving something to someone with power so that s/he abuses his/her power and acts in favour of the giver.<sup>3</sup> A country that offers a stable, efficient and cost-efficient business environment is able to attract more overseas investors to invest in the country. Acting against corruption helps increase confidence among investors.

If a country with high levels of corruption runs the risk to lose current and future investments, the harmful effects are especially severe on the poor, who are strongly hit by economic decline, most reliant on the provision of good economy to get jobs and a decent living, and least capable of paying the extra costs associated with bribery, fraud, and the misappropriation of economic privileges.<sup>4</sup> The desire to have a reliable and honest cabinet comes from the fact that money is wasted on unproductive projects whereas funds could have been channelled into healthcare, public transport, environmental protection, education, scientific research and development. The considerable resources at disposal could have been used to promote genuine human development, greater food security and a more independent economy.

Actually, a person's sense of right and wrong alone may not be sufficient to fight corruption. In order to eradicate corruption on a large scale, a system-wide approach has to be considered, especially in the area of good governance. Anti-corruption should not only be aimed at installing the right values and attitudes, but should go beyond that and strengthen processes and institutions as well as punitive measures. The Malaysian Integrity Institute has been launched to promote ethics and enhance integrity in the country, and to support anti-corruption measures. The police and other security forces will continue to be strengthened and upgraded to ensure peace and security in the country. Prime Minister Badawi's goal is to build a society of individuals showing high degrees of integrity, character and the fortitude to work towards a state of 'zero corruption'.

## **2. What Role Can Christians Play?**

### *2.1. Religious Leaders With Unbending Integrity*

What kind of religious leadership does help building strong Christian communities with integrity? Integrity is the most important attribute of a religious leader: 'The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? [...] For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.' (1 Tim 3:1-5:13)<sup>5</sup> Church leadership is a responsibility, not a right. It is extended to those who come under the authority of the church's teachings as expounded in the Bible and church traditions. It has always been a demanding call-

ing. To live with integrity is captive to Christian conviction and biblical priorities. They are firmly convinced to the highest ethical standards in both personal and professional conduct.

Let me share an experience with you. It is common to bribe the policemen who catch you committing a traffic offence. I have been naughty, when stopped. My answer to the policeman was ‘Sorry, I am wrong.’ I was prepared to pay the fine (RM 100-300) instead of a smaller amount as bribe and asked for the ticket. Today, the gap between Christian and societal values makes this particularly challenging. As we serve Christ in leadership, we model what we really believe about our faith. Both our beliefs and our lifestyles are critical to the way we serve Christ and project Christian leadership.

Religious leaders teach others that they can hold firm to moral integrity without compromising themselves and without asking others to. Good religious leaders model the preservation of one’s integrity for the rest of the believers in a way to encourage them to be honest and to refuse to give bribes to get what they want. God calls for men and women of heart, of mind, and of moral integrity, whom He can make the depositories of His truth, and who will correctly represent its sacred principles in their daily life. ‘He [Christ] has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.’ (2 Pet 1:4)<sup>6</sup>

A religious leader, according to Christ’s measurement, is one who will manifest unbending integrity. Deceitful weights and false balances, with which many seek the easy way, are dishonest in the sight of God. Yet many who profess to keep the commandments of God are dealing with false weights and false balances. When a man is indeed connected with God, and is keeping His word in truth, his life will mirror his inner condition; for all his actions will be in harmony with the teachings of Christ. He will not sell his honour for gain. His principles are built upon steady foundations, and his conduct in worldly matters is a transcript of his principles.

Building a church where one can worship is a right of the Christians in this country. Asking bribes against permission or approval to build a church is to force to bribe in order to deliver one’s due. And unfortunately, the great majority of the government officials are corruptible. If a pastor/church leader is forced to pay unjustly to obtain what is due to him/her, s/he must continue to fight against corruption to get what is just.

## *2.2. Religious Leaders Are Committed to Serious Bible Study*

The churches need to ask : ‘How many of our “successful” Christians, both in church and on the market place, have been able to main-

tain a life of integrity that fully reflects the values of our faith in Jesus Christ?' Indeed, many Christians struggling with integrity find insufficient pastoral help from our churches to resist further corruption. The church needs to encourage the moral transformation of Christian communities through: a) living according to the right values and commit the right actions as Christians; and b) respond to the needs and challenges of the country as the duty of Christians towards moral transformation.

Therefore, religious leaders are committed to undertake serious Bible study and help church communities to educate themselves. They need to have a clear understanding of Christian moral principles, appropriately interpreted and applied to our context and situation. The Old Testament is very clear on the prohibition of the use of a bribe to pervert justice: 'Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous.' (Deut 16:19)

But in the Asian culture, the line between a bribe and a gift is not always clear. What is the appropriate manner or action, then? If a gift is huge compared to what has been given (for example RM 20,000 for the approval of a church building plan), then it is unethical. What about giving a hamper of RM 200 to express one's appreciation? Is it unethical to oil somebody's palm to get a tender over another or others who deserve it more, thus causing injustice? It appears necessary to encourage serious Bible study to bring out in-depth theological reflection and to combine it with serious study on the Chinese or Indian cultures and customs. It will help Christians to gain the inner spiritual strength necessary to handle their work or business without having recourse to bribing.

### 2.3. *Christians' Role and Task*

As a full-time minister in the Malaysian Church (i.e. as a Deaconess and a lecturer in the Seminary), I see that the task faced by our Prime Minister is immense. We, the Christians in this country, should show our support with concrete actions and not mere lip service. What role must we play, as religious leaders and Malaysians, in our church and teachings? Here are a few responses:

- Live godly lives transformed by the daily work of the Holy Spirit.
- Practice what we teach.
- Hold fast with our integrity, and whatever the situation, give no bribe.
- Be keen to join hands and seek to collaborate with other Christian organisations or NGOs working towards a better Malaysian society.

- Encourage our members to live godly lives transformed by the daily work of the Holy Spirit, seek integration in every area of their lives, including in the area of their involvement in the marketplace and to take the mantle of exemplary leadership to be agents for change.

Changing the image of people by promoting a value-based society with a clear sense of morals will need the unfailing support of the Christian churches and religious leaders.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from articles by Theresa Manavalan in *New Straits Times*, Kuala Lumpur Muslimedia, 1-15 May 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Corruption represents a major leakage of funds in the country and will only aggravate the already significant budget deficit.

<sup>3</sup> Speech given by the Prime Minister on the 'The World Ethics and Integrity Forum 2005' in Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>4</sup> 'Malaysia to Sign Anti-Corruption Convention,' see [www.dailyexpress.com.my/print.cfm?newsID=23311](http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/print.cfm?newsID=23311).

<sup>5</sup> See the Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*