By Goh Keat Peng

First published in onGOHing.wordpress.com

Regardless of the results of the Sibu parliamentary by-elections, the reported “special grants” of RM1.75 million to four Methodist churches on the eve of polling day is very troubling to me as a Christian who attends a Methodist church and I am sure to many other Christians.

It is always troubling when a sitting government, regardless of which party, has to resort to dishing out “special grants” to various sections of the constituency involved in an election for the sole purpose of increasing their votability.

Such last-minute attempts to be seen as being sympathetic to the concerns and needs of specific sectors of voters is dishonest, insincere and hypocritical.

A sitting government which is genuinely sincere would have had a system in place to gauge issues and needs of the respective voters and to have an orderly, transparent, fair and effective way of allocating adequate budget and plans to resolve problems on the ground.

It is difficult to see how large sums of public money could suddenly become available or that the people’s needs could suddenly catch the eyes of the powers that be only when election campaigns are on.

The issues, needs and concerns faced by religious communities, Muslim as well as non-Muslim, are there for all to see. If sincerely, fairly and properly dealt with, they would not become election issues.

Likewise, issues facing particular ethnic communities or perennial problems and threats such as floods, road conditions, etc. Therefore, last minute “election goodies” and “special grants” are tacit admissions of lack of proper and honest planning and implementation on the part of a sitting government.

Apart from all this, the matter of offering “special grants” to the four Methodist churches in Sibu on the eve of polling day is especially troubling to me on account of the fact that I am a Christian and a member of the Methodist Church, a denomination which among other things have served the people of this country well before its independence in various social fields including education and especially the education of women one of whom was my own mother.

I was saddened and very concerned about comments that were made regarding these “special grants” by concerned citizens who not only care about Sibu and Malaysia but also about the possibility of how this blatantly desperate episode could also affect the churches’ good name.

Here are a few samples of such comments:

Jin Chuah: The worry part is RM1.75 million of Federal allocation has channelled into 4 Methodist churches in Sibu resulting those Christians who yet to cast their votes may not turn up.

Tan: god is watching SIBU”, but he is helpless with BN’s goodies.

Abang Adek: Like I said last night, God is nothing compared to money. And the Methodist Churches who took the bribes from the BN only prove again to all, that God is nothing compared to money. You PR guys only hope in miracles. Well, the miracle happening today is the miracle of $$$. Money talks, Money walks…

Fairplay Lee: All Christian brothers and sisters do not be cheated and wake up and vote for justice and be guided by the holy spirit.

Disappointed: the RM1.75 million Federal Fund channelled to 4 churches is not BN pocket money but rightfully the rakyat's money. Dont u think the money comes a bit too late. Think Sibuan b4 casting yr votes.

Aca: santa… gives millions to churches and only RM600 per head to poor Ibans. Next round maybe Ibans get RM6,000 per head and RM600 per church. Wonder whether the pastors can be corrupted by the millions?

Kumar: Pg: Dengan rasuah sebanyak RM1.75m, adakah orang kristian akan meyerahkan maruah ugama mereka kepada UMNO?

Anil: If you ask me, I don't think the churches in Sibu should have accepted those grants during the election campaign period -even if their followers can still vote as they please. After all, this is

vote-buying and both the buyer and the recipient need to be responsible (though one can understand the circumstances of those who desperately need the money). But I don't think the churches are in such desperation. They are called to uphold a higher standard and should set an example to others by rejecting corruption in all its forms. It would also be a telling lesson to those who offer them the money - that there are some things that money just cannot buy.

The spot light rightly or wrongly is therefore very much on the Christian Church in Malaysia regardless of denomination or communion.

Malaysians are watching us and wondering aloud or silently, waiting to see what we will do under these circumstances, waiting for a clear word from us.

This happened in Sibu but its ramifications will be much wider in scope and depth. It is not even just to do with the Christian community as such but how elections are conducted in the country and how we conduct ourselves during elections and at other times.

I respectfully appeal to the churches directly involved in this episode:

If it isn’t true and it didn’t happen, then please say so.

If it is true, offered and received, give it all back.

WE DON’T WANT SUCH MONEY.

Let the church be poor (as a church mouse) but as the Book of Proverbs say, poor but happy keeping a clear conscience.

I also respectfully appeal to all Malaysian churches through the Christian Federation of Malaysia:

Please let us send a clear, unmistakeable and irrevocable message to the country and the world. As citizens and tax-payers we deserve to practise and observe our religious faith in peaceful and orderly fashion and we should get reasonable amounts of resources to enable us to do so.

Any sitting government is welcome to sit down with us, discuss and understand in a timely and civil way our religion and our community's needs and concerns regarding places of worship, burial grounds and our bibles in Bahasa Malaysia as well as how we will continue to serve all Malaysians in need through our social services.

Provide the facilities and resources justly due to us but please don't give us "special grants" only at the eve of by-elections. WE DON'T TAKE SUCH MONEY. No, thank you.

Never under such circumstances.

Otherwise, we will be sending the message to the government, present or future, BN or PR, that the church which bears the name of Christ is ever willing to take money under such circumstances:

“Make us an offer, we are open to such funding. We encourage electioneering where money is utilised as a means to win votes. Is there a higher bid?”

The Christian Church preaches moral values and standards in all things to all people. It wants to take the moral high ground. It must therefore be subjected to the same high moral standards which it espouses.

We serve a risen saviour whose birth in human form was in a humble manger because there was no room in the inn for his parents.

Let us stay true to our calling.