

Christians From 32 Countries Reclaim Native Customs

'World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People' drew 2,000 to New Zealand

Indigenous Christians from around the world were challenged to rediscover their traditional lifestyles and customs—and to reclaim them for Christ—during the first World Gathering of Indigenous People in New Zealand last November.

Nearly 2,000 people from 32 countries, representing up to 100 different tribes and cultural groups, attended the gathering in Rotorua, New Zealand.

Chief organizer Monte Ohia, a native New Zealand Maori, believes the conference liberated many indigenous Christians to reflect their faith through their own traditions and cultures.

"The mood among indigenous people worldwide is that they don't want to change from being who they are into someone else," says Ohia. "We have discovered and affirmed that we can enter Christ and redeem our ceremonies, protocols, etiquette, music, dance, songs, arts and crafts."

Recognizing their heritage and incorporating it into their worship of Jesus Christ is the only way that indigenous groups can hope to evangelize their own, Ohia said.

He gives the example of the Maori warrior who performed a taiaha, or traditional spear dance, at the gathering. Instead of being a traditional war dance, it was a representation of spiritual warfare performed to the theme of Romans 16:20: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (NIV).

The warrior wasn't a Christian when he did the dance, but he has since become one, Ohia said.

"It shows how culture can be part of evangelism," Ohia said. "Somehow the Word has gone through his taiaha and into his heart. He will never forget Romans 16:20 now."

Ohia says the conference developed into three strands:

- Exploring how to glorify God with different languages and cultures.
- Reconciling white people and



The colors of God's world: Buthelezi (left) of South Africa and Sioux leader Richard Twiss.

indigenous people.

- Repenting by indigenous people for the sins they have committed.

Other non-Christian indigenous gatherings have been notable for their sense of rage and injustice at wrongs committed against indigenous people, but they have produced very few answers and constructive ideas, Ohia said.

"Other groups cannot come up with a solution because they are so engrossed in the injustice," he noted. "At this conference, we kept coming back to the idea, 'But we have Jesus Christ...' Everybody was brought back to the centrality of God."

The gathering was unlike traditional Western conferences of similar size. Rotorua is a city steeped in the culture of the Maori—the native people of New Zealand.

Prominent groups attending included a number of native American tribes, the aboriginal people of

Australia, the Maori of New Zealand and the Saami of Scandinavia—one of the few indigenous peoples with white skin who have suffered massive injustice in days gone by. Everyone wore traditional native clothing.

Every culture present brought its own richness, color and faith and inspired the rest to draw closer to God in their own cultural setting. In many cases, the groups concerned were breaking out of centuries of repression due to cultural distinctives.

Ohia gives the example of the native Americans—many of whom were from different tribes and places—who debated long and hard about what was acceptable and what was not the day before their dramatic entry to the meeting place.

The result was one of the most powerful moments of the gathering when about 100 native Americans—most dressed in traditional costumes—came into the meeting place to the tune of traditional music and performed a dance before encircling the group.

"It wasn't powerful only for them," said Ohia. "Even though we had no idea of the intricacies of the dance, we knew the Holy Spirit was anointing it, and He was anointing us—everybody—at the same time."

The presence of South African Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, an outspoken Christian, caused controversy before the gathering. Prominent New Zealand anti-apartheid activist Trevor Richards accused Buthelezi of running a group known for its violence against President Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC).

Before arriving in New Zealand, the chief denied that he had ever authorized violence, though he admitted that some of his people had perpetuated violent acts. He described his party as "practicing and preaching nothing but non-violence."

In New Zealand, Buthelezi then