

Natives embrace own culture to worship God

by Gordon Legge

There is a new movement emerging among native evangelicals that blends indigenous cultural expressions — such as dancing, chanting and drumming — with the worship of Jesus Christ.

This was showcased at the Many Nations, One Voice — Celebrations 2000 conference held at the University of Calgary in late June.

Several hundred native and non-native Christians gathered over the course of three days to listen to a variety of Christian leaders, while linking hands, drumming and singing songs like *Kenorahkwa* (Love Medicine) — a call to take the loving medicine of Jesus to the people of the world.

"Yesos Ga Non Ron Kwa/Hi Ya Weh Hi Yoh/Yesos Yaweh Ga Non Ron Kwa. Jesus is Good Medicine/Ga Non Ron Kwa/Ga Non Ron Kwa," the people sang.

"This conference is long overdue," said Vincent Yellow Old Woman, an evangelist from the Siksika Nation, who recounted how the native cultural traditions have been unnecessarily suppressed within the Christian church for far too long.

"It was historic," said Dean Shingoose, pastor of Calgary Native Pentecostal Church and one of the conference organizers.

"I think it allowed people to see aboriginal people in a positive light in the context of their culture," he said in an interview afterwards. "I think it brought a lot of healing to native people."

People usually associate native singing and dancing in a non-Christian context, such as pow-wows or the Calgary Stampede's Indian Village.

"They had a chance to see their cultural expression as a valid form of worship," Shingoose explained.

"We're using the culture as a means to glorifying God. We want worship to be Christ-centered. If it's not Christ and Word-centered, it's invalid."

First Nations worship leaders, like Shingoose, claim this new integration of culture and worship will help reach many more native people for Christ.

They also say it will help indigenous people lead the way in taking Christ to all nations in a new wave of renewal.

Shingoose added the conference may have served as the long-awaited follow-up to the Easter sunrise service on Nose Hill Park in 1993, during which the city's church leaders apologized to southern Alberta's native community for historic injustices committed against the region's indigenous peoples.

Yet the new movement is not without controversy. For centuries, Christian missionaries sought to eradicate native spiritual expressions, viewing them as pagan or heathen.

In recent decades, however, there has been an attempt, particularly among mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics to integrate some of the cultural expressions into Christian worship. The key is to avoid syncretism, a blending of Christian and pagan beliefs.

"Ethnic sensitivity is appropriate and long overdue," said Gary Walsh, president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), who addressed the opening session.



CALGARY Pastor Dean Shingoose beats native drum.

"The safeguard is an emphasis on the Christian essentials," he said afterwards.

Shingoose, a Saulteaux from Saskatchewan, has pastored his Calgary congregation for the past 10 years.

More and more, Shingoose and many other native pastors have struggled with why Christianity, despite hundreds of years of missionary activity, has barely made a dent among indigenous peoples in North America.

In 1998, he attended a World Christian Gathering of Indigenous Peoples in Rapid City, South Dakota. There he witnessed First Nations peoples worshipping Christ wearing traditional regalia and celebrating ceremonial songs, music and dance.

This year, Richard Twiss, a Lakota Christian minister and president of Wiconi International, began staging Many Nations, One Voice conferences across North America. The Calgary conference was a first for Canada.

A dozen years ago, Twiss, 46, began asking himself, "How do we present Jesus to native people in a way that doesn't repel them, but attracts them into a life promised by His father?"

Interviewed in Calgary, Twiss said it is no different than what is done to attract young people to a Christian youth group — you bring in rockers, not 70-year-old Southern Gospel artists.

The Anglo church community and the Christian academic community is very supportive, said Twiss, who was once a

member of the radical militant American Indian Movement before becoming a born-again Christian in 1974.

"We find the greatest opposition from native Christian leaders," he explained.

Opponents come out of a paternalistic, Anglo missionary background, he said, which teaches that native ways are steeped in the occult and are devices of the devil. They believe traditional practices must be replaced by European-Christian approaches.

Cultural practices are being confused with religious practices. It's a question of ensuring that Christ is not compromised, he said. "The biggest obstacle is ignorance, a lack of knowledge."

Twiss, who has taken native Christian groups to China and Europe, said their cultural expressions provide a springboard to witness for the cause of Christ as people all over the world are fascinated by indigenous peoples.

In Switzerland, for example, the group began drumming in a Lausanne park and within minutes a couple of hundred people gathered around. The native pastors used the occasion to preach the gospel.

The trip came about because a Christian from Switzerland attended the Rapid City gathering and began working to bring an evangelistic team of native people to Europe.

"God is sovereignly placing us in positions of international ministry," Twiss said.

Canada's urban natives are also a mission field, Shingoose said.

In Calgary, there are about 26,000 native people. Yet there are only two evangelical Christian churches which minister specifically to native people. The other congregation is the Native Bible Fellowship. And between them, they have little more than a hundred members. Three other churches have folded in recent years.

There are many reasons why native Christian churches struggle. Shingoose told an afternoon workshop about the challenges facing urban aboriginal ministry. They include poverty, high unemployment, drug and alcohol problems, an abnormally high suicide rate and an extremely young population with an aversion to Christianity because of past abuses.

Assimilation has failed abysmally, Shingoose said. Rather, maintaining their identity is central to the healing of First Nations peoples.

Shingoose, who participated in Calgary's Easter sunrise service seven years ago, hoped it would lead to other initiatives between the two communities.

"We're forgotten; we're invisible," he lamented.

The evangelical community needs to make a commitment to develop aboriginal leaders and aboriginal churches with aboriginal members, said Shingoose, who dreams of one day pastoring a full-fledged Teepee church in Calgary.

Yet Shingoose, a member of the EFC's Aboriginal Task Force, said he's encouraged by a new level of openness. So is EFC president Walsh.

"Awareness is growing," Walsh said. "I think there is real openness to ministering with the native community."