

Native Americans Use Culture for Christ

But the movement to use drums, feathers and costumes in worship has triggered controversy

Charles Schmidt normally wears a sports coat and tie when he preaches at his church in Silver Spring, Md., just outside Washington, D.C. But on the evening of May 6, the charismatic pastor of Immanuel's Church donned brightly colored moccasins with decorative fringe. By the end of the service he was beating a handheld Indian drum while his congregation danced in the aisles to the sound of Native American praise.

"I am not a white man!" Schmidt told a crowd gathered at his church for the three-day "Many Nations, One Voice" conference. Holding up a sheet of solid-white paper, the noticeably Caucasian pastor declared: "This is white. Nobody has skin this color." Then, holding up a piece of bright-red construction paper, he added: "And nobody has skin this color, either."

Native Americans in the auditorium cheered in response to Schmidt's remarks. Representing Mohawk, Lakota, Cherokee, Makah and other tribes, they came to the evening service sporting feathered headdresses and buckskin leggings. Some wore face paint. To worship the Lord they brought their own war drums and handmade flutes.

The conference, one of four similar events being held this year in North America, was a festive coming-out party for Native Christians who say they are finding acceptance in the American church after years of being shut out of the

mainstream because of racism.

At the helm of this vibrant Native American Christian movement is Richard Twiss, 46, a Lakota evangelist who wants Indians to know that their culture is not evil. As emcee of the conference in Maryland, he wore his jet black hair in a

ponytail, with two large eagle feathers sticking up from the crown of his head. Twiss elicited applause when he announced plans to take a team of ministers to Europe this summer to evangelize the same nations that sent missionaries to this continent 500 years ago to reach “uncivilized” Native tribes.

“We won’t make them wear our feathers and buckskin,” Twiss said of his mission to Europeans. “We will let them have their music and their culture. But we will give them the gospel!”

Twiss’ comments were meant to heal. Most Native Christians know that when missionaries came to North America centuries ago, they often promoted a government-sponsored agenda aimed at wiping out Indian culture. Even today, Native people are told they must reject their music, language and tribal customs in order to serve God.

“They call it syncretism or idolatry if we use Native American music or dancing” in church services, Twiss told Charisma. “People are afraid that if we beat a native drum it will bring an evil spirit.”

Twiss has just finished a book about the emerging Native Christian movement, titled 500 Years of Bad Haircuts, to be published by Renew in August. Although his attempt to reintroduce Indian culture to the church is considered controversial, a growing group of Native ministers supports

his view.

One of the most vocal is Art Begay, 38, a Lakota preacher who bases his Warriors for Christ ministry in Columbia Falls, Mont. Through the use of Native dance and music, he has won dozens of people to Christ at popular Indian festivals called powwows. This year at the largest powwow in Texas, Begay's team will perform a Christian drama with Indian themes.

Well-meaning Christians have warned Begay that he is compromising his faith by performing Native dances. Some of his meetings have been cancelled after pastors learned of his culturally inclusive approach. One pastor's wife asked if she could cast an Indian spirit out of him.

"There are some people who think an eagle feather is some type of evil influence," said Begay, who is affiliated with the Assemblies of God (AG). "But we are not promoting Indian religion. We aren't going to start smoking peace pipes. We are using our culture as a tool to take the gospel to our tribes."

AG evangelist Doug Yates Jr., 37, uses Native dance and other cultural expressions to attract Eskimo and Inuit youth to Christian events in Alaska. His Anchorage-based ministry, Young Warriors, is aimed at reaching Native teen-agers who are considered at-risk because of high rates of suicide and alcoholism. The use of Native culture is a huge drawing card for Inuit teens who otherwise feel disenfranchised and isolated from their roots, Yates said.

It has also helped Yates discover his own style. "I can't be a white preacher," he said. "I have to be who I am."

Older Native church leaders who still follow the instructions they received from white missionaries typically oppose efforts to embrace Indian culture, and the topic is considered divisive in Native circles.

One Native Christian conference held in May in Branson, Mo., printed the warning "No Drums or Feathers" on the front of its promotional brochure. The event's featured speaker was televangelist Kenneth Copeland, who is part Cherokee.

George Kallappa, 61, director of the AG's Native Christian Resource Center in Mesa, Ariz., told Charisma that he would have opposed the Native culture movement seven years ago. Now he is considered a revolutionary by the old guard, he says. For the last three years he helped draft a document for his denomination that endorses the use of Native culture for purposes of worship and evangelism.

The statement will be voted on this August at the AG's General Council in Indianapolis. Some observers expect that statement, if passed, to trigger a similar move in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, which has a sizable Native membership.

Twiss hopes the AG statement will help soothe the tension created by the culture debate. "They are not our enemies," he says of his critics. "We are not fighting them. We have enough divisions in the Native church already."