

Ross Maracle Works to Heal Canada's Native People

Ross Maracle calls himself a 'war chief' who is rallying Indians in Toronto to follow Christ

A First Nations TV evangelist is taking to the streets and homes of Toronto to raise up a church for the Canadian city's disparate Indian population.

Ross Maracle—half-Mohawk and half-British—says he is called by God to establish The Gathering Place, a church for the city's 50,000 Native Canadians. Toronto means "gathering place" and is home to members of several Indian tribes, including the Ojibway, Cree, Mohawk, Micmac and Inuit.

Previous attempts by others to establish a church in Toronto for Native peoples have failed miserably. Currently, there are no more than four traditional Indian-Christian meetings a week in this city of more than 4 million. Each service attracts only 10-12 attendees.

Maracle believes his church will succeed because it is being built upon relationships, a model he says will result in individuals, or "streams," becoming a "river" through which God can reach Native Canadians with His love.

"Native Canadians are, for the most part, so bruised and broken that they can only come to health and intimacy with God and man through nurturing relationships," Maracle, 56, told Charisma. "We will see many Native Canadians in this city be saved, healed and walk into their destinies as leaders."

"After 500 years of missions work amongst Native Canadians, where is stable Native Christian leadership?" Maracle asked. "I see myself as a war chief rallying a force of people like Ezekiel did in the valley of dry bones."

Maracle and his wife, Linda, moved recently to Toronto from Deseronto, a small town near the nation's capital, Ottawa, where his TV show Spirit Alive is broadcast and produced. He still commutes frequently to Deseronto to tape shows. Spirit Alive, hosted by Maracle, is the only Native Canadian show broadcast coast to coast.

Maracle and nine helpers are building The Gathering Place layer by layer, starting with programs for children and women, followed by ones for men. Their strategy is simple—start with those whose hearts are most open. The family focus of his ministry is all-important because 80 percent of Native Canadian families in Toronto are led by single parents.

Maracle envisions The Gathering Place, whose physical structure is not yet established, as a church for Native Canadians from all walks of life. He says Native outreach too often focuses only on tribal members who are living on the street—which, in Toronto, is 35 percent of the Indian population.

The team works with other Native organizations across the city, including Wigwaman Terrace, a retirement home for Native Canadians, and the Native Street Patrol, which spreads the love of Jesus and provides sleeping bags, blankets and socks to the homeless.

Because of his parents' ethnic mix, Maracle says he

understands both sides of being Native and non-Native. His father was Mohawk, and his mother is from English and Scottish heritage.

They raised him in a strong Christian home where he became a believer at age 8, and he says he knew even then that God had called him to minister among Native peoples. After attending a university for Native studies and graduating from a Pentecostal Bible college, Maracle turned his back on his Native heritage for four years, a decision that broke his father's heart.

"The suicides of many of my people, including my own relatives, brought me back home, and I haven't looked back since," he said.

On the air since 1988, Spirit Alive has resulted in hundreds of transformed lives. Some viewers in the remote Canadian north, he says, have watched the program by powering their televisions with gasoline generators. The fully equipped Spirit Alive production studio in Deseronto is the only one ever built on Native Canadian land.

-Josie Newman in Canada