

Respect for rights and dignity

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From the start of the Congress, keynote addresses were interspersed with testimony of community peace-building experiences from various parts of the world.



In Saskatchewan, Canada, the "Intercultural Grandmothers Uniting" are working to build bridges across racial and generational lines. Shirley Major Bonk, whose roots lie in both Canada's aboriginal and European cultures, described how she struggled with alcoholism and violence -- a struggle that included a prison term -- until she decided to learn more about "the Indian part of me." She turned to the spiritual traditions of her ancestors and finally, in a sweat lodge, her internal battle ended. "I started listening to the great Spirit's voice

instead of my own," she said. From that experience was born her desire to help other young people of indigenous descent avoid similar difficulties.

June Mitchell's road to the Grandmothers also included a jail term -- for civil disobedience in support of a Mohawk community fighting expropriation of its lands in Oka, Quebec. Both women now participate in programs organised by the Grandmothers, including literacy training and working in schools to counter racism and violence. Their message, they say, is that "we can take action against violence, disrespect and ignorance while building bridges of understanding, respect and friendship between the races and generations."

In the "eternal summer" of the Pacific islands, original peoples are engaged in similar struggles to gain respect for their rights and their dignity. In Tahiti, French law allowing private ownership of land undermined long-standing traditions of communal ownership. Families began to sell their land to acquire money to educate their children or purchase houses and cars.

During the 1960s, WACC member Thierry Tapu recounted, many residents of the island of Maiao sold their land to a particular trader to whom they had become indebted. A confrontation resulted when the trader began to usurp the chief's authority, insisting that no products be removed from the island without his permission. Two years of negotiation, supported by local clergy, led to an agreement by which people could reclaim their land by paying off their debts to the trader. The process took a decade, but the community finally recovered the land, set strict limits on the presence of outsiders on the island and returned to traditional methods of resolving land-related problems.

In Papua New Guinea, traditional methods including chewing betelnut, breaking sugar cane, feasting, singing and dancing are important elements in reconciliation processes. WACC member Susan Setae described how women, who traditionally are decision makers in their communities, also play a key role, sometimes merely by their presence. During an outbreak of violence over demands for autonomy in Bougainville in 1989, they played a direct role. Despite the importance of their efforts, however, they were excluded from formal negotiations -- a sign of the work that remains to be done, there and in much of the world, to ensure respect for the dignity and rights of aboriginal peoples and women.