

THE CHURCH

All Native Circle Conference

A mood of pride and assurance

To call it an annual meeting unlike those of the other 12 Conferences would still not adequately describe the June gathering of All Native Circle Conference in Nelson House, Man. The sacred fire in a circle of tents outside one of the two large tents overlooking the shores of Footprint Lake burned throughout. Every morning before the session's start, the sacred bundle was unwrapped and its elements were placed on a blanket in front of the Speaker: tobacco and corn from the Mohawk people, a pipe from Alberta's All Tribes, a talking stick from the nations of the British Columbia coast, sweet grass from the Cree of the plains, an eagle feather. And, of course, a Bible and a wooden cross. The spirituality of the aboriginal peoples tends not to argue the fine points of theology, but to include and respect, they say, whatever beliefs and traditions are present.

The mood was set by dogs wandering into the midst of Presbytery meetings — and out again; tribal dancers from the plains entertaining at night; feasts of moose meat; Gospel songs sung in Cree to a country beat. A constant breeze blessedly kept black flies and mosquitoes at bay; the smell of woodsmoke lingered in the air; the murmur of Cree in the meetings was oddly juxtaposed against the soft rattle of a laptop word processor recording the proceedings. Overhead was the *chop chop chop* of a helicopter ferrying workers back and forth from the community to fight forest fires in the surrounding wilderness.

Nelson House is 12 hours north of Winnipeg by car or bus, an hour's ride over rough road even from the nearest airport at Thompson. Its 1,800 people raised \$12,000 through bake sales and



LARRY KROTZ OBSERVER PHOTOS



Relaxing around camp fire at Nelson House meeting site, delegates from South Indian Lake; bottom, Manitoba youth delegates.

bingos in order to have 250 other United Church Native people (and a few non-Natives including Moderator Rt. Rev. Sang Chul Lee) visit for the second annual meeting of the All Native Circle Conference. In the course of the meetings the Conference welcomed a new Presbytery: Great Lakes Waterway Presbytery is starting off with five congregations from Walpole Island in the west to Kahnawake in the east, though a number of other Native churches in Ontario and Quebec are working toward membership. There was also a full day of prayer, and a youth-elders workshop for 60 youth from across the country.

The meetings coincided with the moment Manitoba Native MLA Elijah Harper was single-handedly stalling the passage of the Meech Lake constitutional accord. Aboriginal people who had been quietly simmering their frustration since the failure of their

own constitutional initiative three years ago, erupted unanimously at this unexpected opportunity. Canada has more than two founding nations and more than one distinct society, they said.

Keewatin Presbytery, much of which is represented by Harper who is from Red Sucker Lake, sent a letter of support to him and to the Manitoba chiefs, and the Grand Council itself passed a resolution urging Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to "include Aboriginal people as full partners in constitutional meetings and to recognize their distinct forms of government."

The meetings sent eight petitions to General Council on a variety of justice issues including concerns about the ways in which the 1992 celebrations commemorating Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of America will be handled. The Conference would like the United Church