

THE CHURCH

All Native Circle Conference

Balancing faith with traditions

These are the sacred things we carry around in a bundle," Rev. Alf Dumont patiently explains to the four-year-old boy who curiously approached the mat in the middle of the floor. Kneeling in the centre of a large circle of chairs, the speaker of the All Native Circle Conference (ANCC) of the United Church points out the objects which represent much of the Native Christian tradition: tobacco, the pipe, the eagle feather, the cross, the Bible, a blanket.

The talking stick is given to the elders when you want to learn something, Dumont says. The matches light the sweetgrass. Its smoke cleanses. The can holds the ashes from the sacred fire burning outside. The corn is an important food for the people of the east.

You walk around the bundle clockwise to show honor and respect for the items, Dumont says.

The impromptu teaching came mid-way through the nine-day grand council meeting of the ANCC this summer at the Peepeekisis reserve northeast of Regina. But it was sym-

bolic of much of the discussion and struggle within the Conference about its peoples' beliefs and traditions. The ANCC is in its infancy. This summer's grand council is only its third.

The sacred bundle was the topic of much discussion both this year and last, as delegates struggled to balance traditional Native ways with Christianity. The delegates, who came from Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec as well as Saskatchewan, discussed whether the bundle should remain open for each day's meetings or be closed, as is a more traditional teaching, once the morning blessing had occurred.

Rev. Grafton Antone of Oneida, Ont., said the sacred bundle contains gifts or investments of office given to Dumont by various tribes. They go wherever the grand council goes and should thus be open whenever the council meets. "It's like a prayer. When you make a prayer it goes and it's left with God. These gifts might be the same thing," he said.

Priscilla Little of Island Lake,



Johnston Garrioch with talking stick.

Man., said the items on the mat were crucial to her people's way of life. "When you see those on the mat there, that's our living on this Earth." She called on the delegates to work toward greater unity. "We must unite together as one."

The elders listened to the dialogue and then decided to keep the bundle open during daily meetings, closing it after the smudging ceremony each evening.

About 80 adults spent much of their time worshipping together, praying and talking about their beliefs and traditions. They sang songs in their own languages and shared a circle of hugs to lift their spirits on a particularly gloomy morning after several days of rain.

"People have brought a lot of heaviness with them," said Dumont. "It's just what's happening in a lot of our communities. This community here has had five deaths within a month. We've had to work extremely hard in the past year to find solutions to problems."

Lloyd MacDougall from Island Lake, Man., said attitudes and understanding of each other and Native Christianity are growing within the Conference. "People are showing their love for one another, not just at this meeting, also across the country," he said. "We begin to see understand-



Ramsay Kicknosway and Song Girl Stonechild were youth elders.