

COP26 event urges religious, indigenous partnership

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue



Members of the Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change attend the COP26 summit in Glasgow, Scotland, on November 3. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)

As world leaders gathered for the United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP26, leaders of the world's religions wanted to make sure the voices of indigenous peoples weren't lost in the crowd.

The climate crisis cannot be solved without recognizing the rights and spiritualities of indigenous peoples, said religious leaders who gathered on November 3 for an official COP26 side event streamed online.

"They go together: We protect our lungs. We protect indigenous peoples," said Azza Karam, secretary general of Religions for Peace.

Making Peace with Nature: Heeding the Call of Indigenous Peoples was organized by the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Communion, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, Religions for Peace, and the World Council of Churches.

Religious leaders play an important role in fighting climate change by sharing with their followers not only practical reasons to take action to protect the environment but also spiritual, ethical, and religious reasons, panelists agreed.

Those leaders increasingly are looking to indigenous peoples for guidance in how to care for lands where they have been “guardians from time immemorial,” according to Marc Andrus, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California and head of the Episcopal Church’s delegation to COP26.

For the Episcopal Church, Andrus said, this includes rethinking and repenting of the church’s role in colonizing indigenous peoples and their lands. For at least two decades, the denomination has been learning about the Doctrine of Discovery, an idea first expressed in a series of 15th-century papal edicts that justifies the discovery and domination by European Christians of lands already inhabited by indigenous peoples.

The Episcopal Church has also become involved with the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, a collaboration between the United Nations and faith-based groups to protect rainforests and the rights of indigenous peoples around the globe.

Any efforts related to the environment and indigenous rights must be done in partnership with indigenous peoples, “not for them, and not in spite of them or around indigenous peoples, but with them,” Andrus said.

Mari Valjakka, pastor of Sámi at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and moderator of the Indigenous Peoples Reference Group of the World Council of Churches, shared why that is important to the Sámi people.

The Sámi live in a remote area of the Arctic that many might consider the perfect place for mining, logging, and wind power, according to Valjakka. But while they are hopeful about transitioning to cleaner energy and more sustainable solutions, she said, they also are concerned about “green colonialism,” including plans to build a wind park on their homeland.

“Here’s the point: we are still here. We are still living there and practicing our traditional livelihoods: fishing, reindeer herding, et cetera,” Valjakka said. “Our land is sacred to us. It gives us life and shelter. It is our home and our church.”

The partnership between religious leaders and indigenous peoples should be important to people of faith, too, said Mark MacDonald, national indigenous archbishop of the Anglican Church of Canada and president of the World Council of Churches for North America.

It’s in indigenous ways of life and philosophies that people of all faiths will find the wisdom they need to sustain a livable planet, MacDonald said. Indigenous life and philosophy, he said, braid together solidarity and communion with all of creation, with all of humanity, and with the spirit.

“This insight, which is the basis of indigenous culture, is also essential to our future,” he said. “It is absolutely critical for us to understand that indigenous people and their life stand in a prophetic relationship with humanity’s future. Let us take heed. Let us listen. Let us understand, for in this we will find life.” –Religion News Service