Spirituality pervades new American Indian museum in Washington: Opening celebrated in service at Washington National Cathedral

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Just as earth tones form an underlying decorative element in the new National Museum of the American Indian, spirituality is an undercurrent within the 254,000-square-foot edifice built on Washington's National Mall.

The top level of the imposing building of light brown limestone features a permanent exhibition that highlights how spiritual beliefs and values merge with the everyday life of native peoples across the Western Hemisphere.

"Spirituality is really a rather fundamental tenet of native life," said Richard West, the director of the newest Smithsonian Institution museum. "It imbues everything, as far as I'm concerned."

The fact that West is also a United Methodist whose Native American heritage is the Southern Cheyenne Tribe also speaks to the efforts of both Christian and native religious leaders to enjoy the museum opening despite wounds from the past.

Native Americans within present U.S. borders suffered disease, displacement and death in such numbers that by 1900 their millions dropped to about 250,000. Native Americans now exceed 2 million and are growing. "It's more than just numbers," West said, alluding to what he calls "a cultural renaissance" under way.

The museum, which opened officially September 21, encompasses native Indian cultures in both Americas. For instance, the fourth-floor exhibition, "Our Universes," uses the spoken and written words of "community curators" to examine eight native communities, from the Lakota in South Dakota to the Mapuche in Chile.

“We are spiritual beings on a human journey,” said Garry Raven, of Manitoba, Canada, who teaches about the Anishinaabe people located in the Great Lakes region and central Canada. “Everything has a spirit and everything is interconnected.”

Emil Her Many Horses, curator of the “Our Universes” exhibit, spoke about spending time with spiritual leaders and elders of the Yup’ik community in Alaska. They were the last in their generation to be raised in “the men’s house,” a place “comparable to their university or their church,” he said. “It’s where they learned all the lessons of life.”

The curator said museum staffers met several times with elders and spiritual leaders of the featured communities, involving them in a review of the exhibit’s design, scripts and use of media. “Anytime we gathered and came together they wanted to have a blessing that went along with it to bless our work so that things went well,” he said.

The sacredness of nature—from mountains to crops—is explained by the different community leaders. In the area devoted to the Q’eq’chi Maya community in Guatemala, a bowl of seeds sits next to two glazed ears of corn. “Seeds are extremely important,” said Don Esteban Pop, a retired school teacher who returned to his Mayan beliefs after many years in the Catholic Church. “The act of seed selection is considered sacred.”

The $200 million landmark, which also has centers in New York and Maryland, houses 800,000 artifacts altogether, according to West. He was recognized for his director’s role on September 26 at Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church in Washington where he and his family are longtime members.

West, 61, is well regarded “among people of all tribes,” David Wilson, superintendent of the Methodists’ Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, told the United Methodist News Service. West, raised a Baptist, said, “I have always found the Methodists open to the social issues that confront native peoples.”

Some museum exhibits include reminders of the Christian influences that left Indians with a mixed legacy. One display case, for instance, contains Bibles and church literature translated into Indian languages, including a Book of Common Prayer rendered into Mohawk by a native leader who served the Loyalist cause during the American Revolution.

Two days before the museum opened, the event was celebrated at the Washington National Cathedral in a service described by Episcopal News Service. The rites recalled Episcopal Church ties going back to 1579 on a northern California beach—the first Anglican services in the future nation.

“We are people who have been blessed by the creator,” declared Carol Gallagher, a suffragan bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia and a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. “This might seem to most Americans to be an incredible contradiction,” she said, referring to Indian peoples going through hunger and persecution and often called meek, childish and ignorant.

“We have been tortured and killed because we cared for our children; we protected our mother earth and we honored and treasured the gifts we had been given—even when we had to whisper and hide, even when our people seemed at their end,” Gallagher said in her sermon. “We have honored and treasured the gifts we have been given—and it is to people just like us that Jesus was speaking.”

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