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Members of the International Indigenous People's Forum on Climate Change look at their phones Nov. 3 at the COP26 U.N. Climate Summit, in Glasgow, Scotland. (AP photo/Alberto Pezzali)



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As world leaders gather for the United Nations' Climate Change Conference, or COP26, to discuss the best way to tackle climate change, leaders of the world's religions want to make sure some voices aren't lost in the crowd.

Namely, the voices of Indigenous peoples from the Arctic to the Equator.

The climate crisis cannot be solved without recognizing the rights and spiritualities of Indigenous peoples, according to religious leaders who gathered Wednesday, Nov. 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.

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

"Protecting our Earth, protecting our world, protecting our natural ecosystem is a religious imperative," said Rabbi David Rosen, international director of the Department of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee and co-president of Religions for Peace.

Those leaders increasingly are looking to Indigenous peoples for guidance in how to care for the lands where they have been "guardians from time immemorial," according to the Rt. Rev. 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, that 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, the idea first expressed in a series of 15th-century papal edicts and, later, royal charters and court rulings, that justifies the discovery and domination by European Christians of lands already inhabited by Indigenous peoples.

The 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.

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The Rev. 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 are Indigenous people who 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, etc.," Valjakka said.

"Our land is sacred to us. It gives us life and shelter. It is our home and our church."

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The partnership between religious leaders and Indigenous peoples should be important to people of faith, too, said the Most Rev. 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."

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