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JAYNE O'CONNOR makes a ceremonial tobacco offering at the Prayer Vigil for the Earth on Saturday in Washington, D.C.

Prayer Vigil for Earth is staged in D.C.

WASHINGTON — Flaming pink strips emerged in the sky, casting the day's first sunlight on the newly erected teepees. Pigeons strutted up the grassy hill rising to the Washington Monument, as if to get a better view.

Slowly, people gathered, some holding young children, others clutching wool blankets, and formed a circle to pray for the Earth.

"Pray from your heart, let your heart tell your mind what to do. That way, everything will be right," Dakota Indian elder Chris Leith told the gathering Saturday in his deep, gravelly voice.

With a slightly chilled breeze ushering away the royal blue night sky, an estimated 300 people were there at sunrise to open the fifth annual Prayer Vigil for the Earth. Thirty hours of prayer amid the nation's monuments end today at noon.

Begun in 1993 by two groups called The Circle and the Wittenberg Center for Alternative Resources, the vigil prays to make the Earth well again — to cure disease, clean the rivers, make the air breathable.

Until this year, the ceremony used only American Indian traditions. But this time, organizers expanded the vigil to other cultures and religions, with Mayan, African and other groups participating. Similar ceremonies were scheduled abroad, in Israel, Thailand and Ireland among