

Tribal elders lead fifth annual prayer vigil to heal Earth

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WASHINGTON — Flaming pink strips emerged in the sky, casting the day's first sunlight on the newly erected tepees. 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 chilly 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.

"Years ago, we never had cancer or diabetes," said Harry Byrd, an 85-year-old Dakota tribe elder and co-founder of the

vigil. "We have to clean up the places, protect Mother Earth."

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 other places.

"Black, red, yellow, white — all men are created equal," Byrd said, kneeling in the center of the prayer circle to observe. "But blood from everyone is red. We all are one. Color means nothing."

At the base of the Washington Monument, 13 tepees formed the outer circle.

People of many races and all ages — some infants, some elderly in wheelchairs — formed an inner loop around a fire after "cleansing" themselves with the pungent smoke of smoldering sage.

In the center of the circle sat tribal elders, a few wearing beads or tasseled jackets, who began the event with a Sunrise Pipe Ceremony.

"This is sacred to us," emcee Leith, whose title at the event was sundance chief, told the crowd through a faltering microphone. "Christianity has Bible, but we have pipe."

All who felt ill were welcomed into the circle to inhale from the pipe. The rest of the participants fed tobacco to the fire.