

Partnership Encourages Theological Training for First Nations Leaders

Long considered a mission field, Native Americans today are moving to the forefront of international evangelism

Partnerships are forming between North American seminaries and First Nations leaders.

The North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAIITS) is a mission-focused institution that mentors and trains aboriginal leaders in contextualized evangelical missions. When NAIITS launched a partnership with Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky., part of its ongoing goal was to encourage graduate-level education among native Christian leaders.

NAIITS chair Terry LeBlanc, national ministries director of My People International, said the partnership is building “a theological foundation for the visioning of new mission paradigms to reach indigenous peoples with the gospel.”

LeBlanc, who is of Mi’kmaq and Acadian descent, has been working on a doctorate in intercultural studies at Asbury for the last two years. His daughter, Jeanine LeBlanc, is also there, working on a Master of Divinity degree.

“As the center of gravity in the Christian world shifts, indigenous peoples long excluded as contributors to the church’s understanding of the nature of the kingdom, community, mission and family are now coming to the forefront in our Western institutions,” said Richard Twiss, a Rosebud Lakota who is pursuing a doctoral degree in missiology at Asbury.

The students currently in the Asbury program are all involved in mission outreaches in North America and abroad. As president of Wiconi International, Twiss is involved in international evangelistic teams and has traveled to Pakistan, China, France, Germany, Tibet, Argentina and Peru.

Randy Woodley, a Keetoowah Cherokee and president of Eagles Wings Ministry, is earning a doctoral degree in intercultural studies at Asbury. Meanwhile, the Rev. Ray Aldred, a Cree from Regina, Saskatchewan, also with My People International, is working on a doctoral degree in theology through the London School of Theology.

Darrell Whiteman, Ph.D., dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Missions, said Asbury's commitment to training indigenous church leaders is based on "this being a 'kairos time' in church history and reflects [the school's] willingness to help create genuine partnerships with First Nations leaders as a response to this 'appointed time.'"

Tite Tienou, Ph.D., academic dean at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill., said that in "today's world indigenous Christians are the majority." Keynoter at the NAIITS missiological symposium last fall, Tienou said "the good news ... is that since 'people of color' now represent the majority of Christians in the world, the perception of Christianity as a Western religion can be corrected."

This could help fulfill the Great Commission, said theologian Adrian Jacobs, a Cayuga from the Six Nations Reserve in Brantford, Ontario. "Many non-Native Christian people have expressed deep, heartfelt apologies for past inhumane treatment of Native people in the name of Christianity," Jacobs said. "Partnership ... would be a concrete expression of repentance."

These First Nations seminary students are part of a growing number of Christian leaders who see a new approach to

theological training that incorporates an indigenous worldview and teaching style. Under the NAIITS umbrella, an Indigenous Christian Alliance of Native leaders was created to unite academic institutions with First Nations ministries in order for the groups to assist and strengthen one another while maintaining their unique cultural distinctives.

“Native peoples’ cultural identity has become a powerful bridge into the hearts of people worldwide for the gospel,” Twiss said.

Woodley’s Eagles Wings Ministry, based in Nicholasville, Ky., has partnered with Asbury to obtain property for developing a short-term missions training center aimed at preparing indigenous leaders from around the world to go back to their people groups and raise up a new generation of leaders.

According to John Dawson, a reconciliation leader and author of Healing America’s Wounds, indigenous groups such as Wiconi, My People and Eagles Wings are “equipping the church to be the united expression, in the midst of immense diversity, of Christ and His kingdom among the nations.”

Jim Uttley Jr.