

The O'Learys

Serving Indigenous Peoples in North America

Reflecting on a Year of Transitions/Celebrating the Birth of Jesus

We want to take a moment and say “chi-miigwech” or a big thank you for those of you who have partnered with us this past year. It's been a very significant year that has consisted of a number of transitions. While Ryan continues to lead the First Peoples Initiative through Converge International Ministries, he has also transitioned into some other new leadership roles. For example, in this past year Ryan began serving as President of the National Association of Native Evangelicals as well as serving on the board of directors for the National Association of Evangelicals. The mission of NANE is to equip, encourage, and unite the Body of Christ in the United States related to Indigenous people and ministry for the glory of God.

However, these new roles haven't been the only transitions we've experienced this year. We also sent out oldest son Joshua off to attend college in the Twin Cities at a Christian college and seminary.

In the midst of all of these transitions, we hold fast to the truth found in Hebrews 13:8 which states that “Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” And, being that we just recently celebrated Christmas, we rejoice that He became “Emmanuel” or God with us through His birth into this sinful, fallen world, ultimately dying on the cross for us, making salvation possible. As we end 2023, we look forward with anticipation all that God is going to do in this coming year. We also want to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

An Important Ministry at the Beginning of 2024

Ryan has been approved to teach a week long intensive at Indian Bible College in Flagstaff, Arizona coming up the week of January 8th-12th, 2024. He will be teaching a course called, “Introduction to Native Ministry” and the class will be from 8:30-4:30 each day. Some people often ask us, “Why are you doing what you are doing in ministry?” A reason why Ryan is going to this school to teach and invest in the next generation of Native Christian leaders is because there is such a lack of such leaders throughout North America, and developing Christian leaders aligns with God's will. We see all throughout Scripture the important role that leaders had, and they still have an extremely important role today.

Here's an overview what Ryan will be teaching during the week: a history of Indigenous people in relationship to Christianity, understanding what is going on in Indigenous culture that the church should be aware of, what is currently happening in Indigenous Christian ministry in North America, an overview of various theological doctrines in relationship to Indigenous ministry, practical aspects of engaging in Indigenous ministry, and the future of Indigenous ministry and having Indigenous Christians participating in God's global mission.

Please keep Ryan in your prayers and that God would give him safe travels, wisdom in knowing what to teach/speak about, for the spiritual growth of his students and particularly as Christian leaders, and that God would give Ryan favor during his time at IBC, one of the primary Bible colleges serving Indigenous people in North America.



An Overview of Our Ministry in 2023

While we can't come close to highlighting everything we did in ministry this past year, we do want to provide a brief overview:

1. **Mobilizing others for Native ministry:** Ryan in particular has provided training for various congregations and groups of people who are preparing to or who have already engaged some in Indigenous ministry.
2. **Investing in the next generation of Native Christian leaders:** One example of this was when Ryan taught/preached and built relationships with Bible college students in Alaska.
3. **Preaching/proclaiming God's word in a variety of contexts:** This has included in variety of churches.
4. **Leading Christ-centered, gospel proclaiming ministries to Indigenous peoples in North America**
5. **Participating in Prayer for First Peoples groups in North America:** This includes in individual prayer times and in our formal, regular prayer gatherings for First People groups.
6. **Teaching God's word to believers in a tribal context:** For example, Ryan taught through the BUILD program on the Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota.
7. **Building relationship with other Christian leaders to mutually bless and work together.**
8. **Participating in evangelistic outreaches:** One example involved Ryan participating and speaking at a Native kid's fishing outreach on the Leech Lake Reservation.

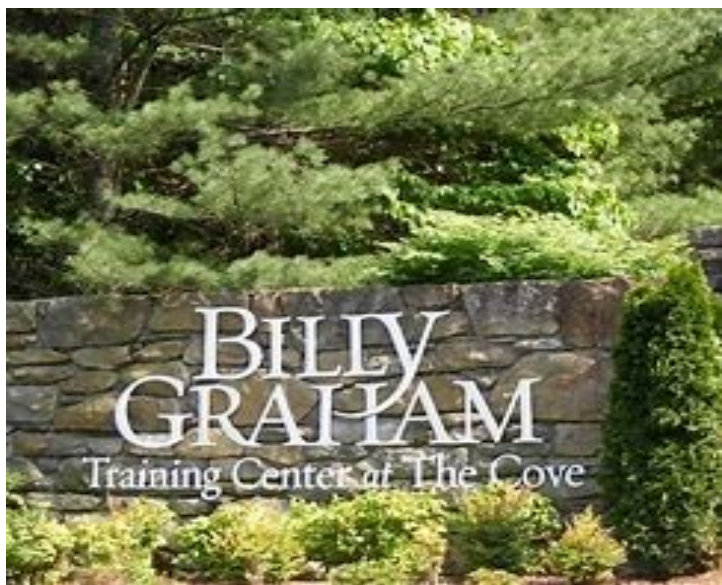
Attending a National Association of Evangelical Leadership Retreat in Ashville, NC at Billy Graham's the Cove Ministry Center

In November, Ryan travelled to Ashville, NC to attend a Christian leadership retreat for Black, Indigenous, people of color at Billy Graham's the Cove ministry center. This trip was a highlight for a number of reasons. Here are a few of them:

Ryan was able to meet key BIPOC leaders nationally and to begin discussing with some of them even how we can work together to advance the cause of Christ. For example, the President of InterVarsity Press attended this event, and this has led Ryan entering into discussions with InterVarsity about publishing a book pertaining to Indigenous Christian ministry in North America.

Ryan was also able to connect more with the President of the National Association of Evangelicals, Walter Kim, which led to a follow up Zoom meeting that Ryan had with Walter to discuss how Dr. Kim and NAE in general might help with what Ryan is doing in Indigenous ministry. Ryan and Walter were able to discuss a number of ways to potentially partner, and we are looking forward to what God has in the future as this relationships grows.

Even though this was an event for people of color, Ryan was the only tribal member in the United States who was asked to come and who attended this event. Being at some of these important national leadership gatherings, particularly ones for Black, Indigenous, people of color is important and needed, so that the Body of Christ is aware of tribal people in the U.S and what is happening in Christian ministry among tribal people.



Preaching and Teaching God's Word

Ryan was asked to be one of four presenters at a Native ministry training event that was held in Bemidji on Saturday, December 2nd. Various believers and leaders came from the Bemidji area as well as from others parts of Minnesota as well to attend this event. There were three parts to Ryan's presentation: the past realities that have created barriers among tribal people toward the gospel, the present and how God is using the faithful Christian witness of many believers to begin removing these barriers to the gospel, and the future and raising up tribal people to participate in God's global mission. Those attending this mostly day long training were blessed and we have scheduled another similar training that will take place in Duluth in the first part of 2024.

Equipping congregations within the First Peoples Initiative to engage in Indigenous ministry

Ryan travelled to Thief River Falls, about an hour and forty five minutes from Bemidji, to speak to a congregation about engaging in ministry at the Red Lake Reservation. This congregation feels the Lord leading them to minister to people on Red Lake, and this reservation is about a half hour drive from this evangelical church in Thief River Falls.

Ryan preached a message called, "Following an Extraordinary Jesus" from John 4 and Jesus' ministry among Samaritans. He encouraged this congregation to be like Jesus and to be willing to go to a people group like Red Lake like Jesus was willing to go to Samaria, and to also share God's truth with people at Red Lake like Jesus did with the Samaritan woman. After both services, the church had a small lunch, and then Ryan led a more in depth session about engaging in Native ministry. About half the people in this congregation who attended the second service stayed around for the special afternoon session in which Ryan provided more Native ministry training.

Coming up the first part of 2024, Ryan has been asked by another congregation who is a part of the First Peoples' Initiative to provide a series of online trainings for people in this congregation related to Indigenous ministry. Ryan and the associate pastor at this church are looking at a 4-6 week training for anyone who is interested in this church to attend. This church has a missions focused on First Peoples groups in North America.

Equipping Missions Organizations about Indigenous People and Ministry

Back at the end of November, as part of Native American Heritage Month, Ryan spoke via zoom at an all staff chapel service for Wycliffe as well as at their staff lunch and learn. It was a rich time of sharing about Indigenous people and ministry for this respected global missions organization!



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