

Part revival, part music fest: 'Wild Goose'

Patrick O'Neill | Jun. 22, 2011



Garreth Higgins

He calls it the Wild Goose Festival, and it will bring together many of the nation's best-known, faith-based progressives for a long weekend gathering in a North Carolina field, just south of Chapel Hill.

Wild Goose, the brainchild of Northern Irish national and peace activist Garreth Higgins, is part music festival, part religious revival and part be-in, to borrow a term from the 1960s. It opens Thursday and runs through Sunday.

Higgins, 36, calls Wild Goose a "gathering of music, art and conversation at the intersection of justice and spirituality."

The festival [Web site states](#) [1]:

"The Wild Goose is a Celtic metaphor for the Holy Spirit. We are followers of Jesus creating a festival of justice, spirituality, music and the arts. The festival is rooted in the Christian tradition and therefore open to all regardless of belief, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, denomination or religious affiliation.

In adopting the image of the Wild Goose we recognize that in the current climate of religious, social and political cynicism, embracing the creative and open nature of our faith is perhaps our greatest asset for rebuilding and strengthening our relationships with each other, with our enemies, with our stories, our texts, and the earth. In that spirit, in a festive setting, and in the context of meaningful, respectful, and sustained relationships..."

Interfaith and eclectic, Wild Goose looks interesting -- even exciting -- on paper. Higgins, who has recruited more than 150 speakers and performers to the gathering, told *NCR* by phone that none of the headliners are being paid, and some even plan to pay their own way to North Carolina.

"Some of them are camping on site," said Higgins. "Nobody is staying in luxury. Everyone has been invited to collapse the general hierarchy that often exists between public figures and audience members, and we're hoping

that people will just be on site and enjoy each others' company."

Higgins said he wants Wild Goose to be an experience that "makes people feel more human at the end of it? Jesus didn't come to establish a religion. He came to show us how to be human."

Unlike the dynamic of most religious gatherings, where the speakers are the headliners everyone comes to see, Higgins is trying to be a radical egalitarian -- challenging the speakers to get off their pedestals to be among the people. And in a unique format, Higgins also wants speakers to wrestle with new ideas as part of their Wild Goose experience.

"The principles we're operating on are very subversive to the accepted order of the way these things are done," Higgins said.

The Wild Goose model is all about, "Don't take yourselves too seriously," Higgins said, "which I think is lovely because I think we take ourselves far too seriously a lot of the time. It's a small enough site that everyone will be able to circulate and bump into each other. You literally will bump into people whose books you've read, whose music you have heard."

The challenge Higgins has presented to most speakers is for them to "give a 20-minute presentation about something that they don't feel that they understand yet. The hope is that the audience will contribute a response to that question, and that really flips the hierarchy that usually happens at events."

The Wild Goose lineup includes well-known old timers such as *Sojourners* founder Jim Wallis, evangelical progressive Tony Campolo, popular author Phyllis Tickle, and Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr.

But Higgins has also invited young upstarts -- such as author and The Simple Way founder Shane Claiborne; pastor Jay Bakker, son of Jim and Tammy Faye; and New Monasticism proponent and founder of The Rutba House, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove.

Wild Goose also includes numerous speakers with North Carolina ties, such as Duke professor Tim Tyson, author of *Blood Done Sign My Name*; Jesuit Fr. John Dear, a North Carolina native; Duke's Muslim chaplain Imam Abdullah Antepli; and co-pastors Nancy Hastings Sehested and Joyce Hollyday of Circle of Mercy, a popular Asheville, N.C., faith community.

Higgins, who relocated to Raleigh, N.C., three years ago, said he also sees changes coming to leadership structures.

"I think the age of the national or international charismatic leader is waning if not over," Higgins said.

"Leadership in the future is going to be a lot of people doing small things, rather than a small number of people doing big things. And I think if we can create a festival where everyone's skill set feels valued, we are fitting with the new culture of leadership that I think's going to arise in global world."

Higgins' diversity model is also unusual for religious gatherings, even among progressives, because of its strong commitment to inclusiveness.

"We can't afford to continue to hold each other at arm's length," Higgins said. "What's tremendously exciting to me about this is that often events take place and it's only one group that goes to it. This is really an attempt to be a kaleidoscope and to be open and welcoming to everyone from whatever Christian faith tradition, whatever other faith tradition or none, but they can come."

With more than 1,200 folks signed up to come -- on-site registration is \$159 per person -- Higgins said Wild

Goose "is already successful. I just think the fact that there is an appetite -- it's obvious people want this. And I think if you get interesting people in a field together for three and a half days good things are bound to happen."

[Patrick O'Neill writes from Garner, NC.]

Editor's Note: Patrick O'Neill will be reporting on the Wild Goose festival from Shakori Hills, N.C., over the weekend. Check back for updates.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.wildgoosefestival.org/>