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With a smearing of mud, 'Wild Goose' takes flight

by Patrick O'Neill



People gather in front of the main stage at the Wild Goose festival June 23. (Photos by Veronica O'Neill)

SILK HOPE, N.C. -- With buckets of water and tubs of mud, the Wild Goose Festival came to life during Thursday evening's opening ceremonies at Shakori Hills Farm, a collection of picturesque fields located just south of Chapel Hill.

In a melding of spirituality, music, story-telling and fellowship, Wild Goose began with a request that those gathered sprinkle water on each other as a form of baptismal renewal, and smear mud on each other as a reminder that all come from dust and to dust they shall return -- and as a reminder that "we are all connected to the earth, and we are connected to one another," said Wild Goose founder Gareth Higgins.

For a few hours before the 5 p.m. opening ceremonies, lines of cars, representing many states, filed down a dirt road in 90-plus degree heat toward check in. Young tattooed evangelicals, musicians with instruments slung over their shoulders, gay Christians of all stripes and seasoned members of the Christian Left emerged, most carrying backpacks, water bottles and sleeping bags.

Many are spending the four days and three nights camping out at the festival, which includes a bruising schedule that begins with yoga at 7:30 a.m. and doesn't let up until a "Nightly Brew Talk Show" that lasts

until 12:30 a.m. Friday's schedule will include "Late Night Sacred Space" that starts at 11:30 p.m. Saturday closes with "Contemporary Compline" beginning at 11 p.m.

For most festival goers, it was a case of too much to do. The first hour of Thursday's programming looked like a track meet schedule with many events on tap simultaneously.



At 6 p.m., five sets of speakers opened Wild Goose, all of them offering interesting bios in the 62-page program. *Sojourners* founder Jim Wallis; Native American Christian Richard Twiss; a panel from Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation; Lynne Hybels, a minister who spoke on "how to get American Christians to care about Palestinians trapped in a military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza?;" and author Ian Cron, whose book, *Jesus My father, the C.I.A. and Me: A Memoir? of Sorts* was distributed free at the festival.

That's the way things will go all weekend at Wild Goose where attendees will likely have to make plenty of hard choices.

"It's incredible," said Paul James, a North Carolinian who lives close to Silk Hope. "Today's not too bad, but tomorrow's going to be really bad when there's something every place and going on all the time. But even tonight it's hard to make a choice. I had to look through the program and put down first choice, second choice for each hour."

"So far so good," said Susan Phillips, who traveled to Wild Goose with her husband and two daughters from Gresham, Wis. "There are lots and lots of options." So many that Phillips will be offering her "Sacred Space" Friday morning program at the same time as three other speakers on the bill.

In his opening remarks, Higgins, 36, said he wanted Wild Goose to be a place to hear peoples' stories, to build relationships and mend the world. He urged people to "draw upon the source of inexhaustible love -- to just reach out and grab it?[and] to learn how to be more human together."

While not taking stands on the usual contentious issues among Christians, such as abortion and the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the life of the church, Higgins has said Wild Goose is inclusive -- all are welcome -- regardless of beliefs or anything else for that matter.

That openness led to a comment from Southern Baptist blogger Ken Silva of New Hampshire-based *Apprising Ministries*: "The wise Christian will have nothing to do with these neo-Gnostic fools who've unbuckled themselves from the Word of God and have embarked upon their Wild Goose Chase of subjective experience."



Silva's comment was carried in a Religion News Service story about the festival.

Another conservative festival-goer took offense to Wild Goose's inclusion of gays and lesbians. As he was helping to staff an exhibit table for the Raleigh, N.C.,-based Gay Christian Network, Trey Weaver, a gay Catholic, found himself being preached at by a man standing near his table citing scripture that some claim opposes homosexuality. After a complaint was made to Wild Goose staff, the preacher was asked to stop, and he left.

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"My initial reaction is it's just unfortunate that he was standing across the road; he wasn't even trying to communicate with us, he wasn't even trying to talk with us," Weaver said.

"He was just talking out loud at us. We're here. That's why we're here, to have that conversation, so come to talk to us."

[Patrick O'Neill is a freelance religion journalist living in Garner, N.C.]

Editor's Note: Patrick O'Neill is reporting on the Wild Goose festival from Shakori Hills, N.C. Check back for updates. See his previous story:

- **Part revival, part music fest: 'Wild Goose'**

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