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At 'Wild Goose,' echoes of Martin Luther King, Jr

by Patrick O'Neill



Vincent Harding (Photo by Patrick O'Neill)

SILK HOPE, N.C. -- In his comments during Thursday's opening ceremony of The Wild Goose Festival at Shakori Hills Farm, Vincent Harding mentioned the obvious -- the festival was overwhelmingly white.

Harding, a close confidant of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., prayed that future festivals would include more people of color. Like so many gatherings of peace-activist types, Wild Goose is comprised primarily of White Geese.

The four-day festival, a unique gathering of religious activists and artists, has attracted more than 1,000 people to a rural site south of Chapel Hill, but the largely Christian crowd is not particularly diverse in ethnicity or race.

While the festival lacks diversity among those laying on blankets on the ground listening to speakers and music, it does include Harding and other African Americans -- two of whom joined Harding on stage during the opening ceremony -- who have been happy to share their stories.

Wild Goose founder Gareth Higgins said the inaugural festival is the first step in "a building process" he hopes will draw larger and more diverse crowds in the future.

"I'm happy with who's here," Higgins said. "We made a point of honoring who's not here."

Higgins said "the vibe of the festival depends on camping," and there's a "cultural reality about camping; the white people do that."

While some people are commuting daily or staying off-site at hotels, most of the festival-goers are staying in pitched tents or RVs. There is not housing available on the Shakori Hills site.

King died 43 years ago, and Harding is surely one of the best people Higgins could have recruited to represent the spirit of the late civil rights leader and pacifist. King called on Harding to write his 1967 Riverside Church speech denouncing the Vietnam War. King delivered his uncompromising denunciation of the war on April 4, 1967, exactly a year to the day before he was assassinated in Memphis.

Many historians and others think it was that speech -- and not his opposition to segregation -- that led to King's martyrdom.

In a Friday morning talk, Harding said he spent the years following King's death carrying guilt because his words may have been the reason King was assassinated.

In 1958, Harding and four of his male friends -- two white and two black -- embarked on a car trip from their Chicago Mennonite church to Alabama to see what was happening in the Jim Crow South.

When the mixed-race group arrived in Montgomery, where King was living at the time, they looked up his number in the local phone book. Coretta Scott King answered. She told the men that her husband was recovering from a stab wound from an attack, but Martin Luther King still said he'd meet with the men. When they arrived King greeted them in his pajamas, Harding said, and expressed surprise that they made it to Montgomery alive.

"We went and had a magnificent couple of hours with Martin," Harding said. "The Dr. King of 1958 was not the Dr. King of 1963, but he was still a very powerful, compelling figure, full of fun."

King also invited Harding to make a deeper commitment. "You guys are Mennonites," Harding said King told them.

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"You know something about nonviolence. You ought to be down here with us."

So began a 10-year relationship between the pair.

"We were able to spend a fair amount of time sharing with each other our hopes and dreams and ideas," Harding said.

Because King spent 200 to 300 days a year on the road, he asked Harding for help drafting the Riverside speech, which Harding said King saw as an opportunity "to express his convictions about the wrongness of that war."

"He asked if I would draft that statement for him," Harding said. "I did that for him, and that is essentially what he shared at Riverside.

"It was clear to me that his assassination was connected to that speech so I was going around with a burden that I shouldn't have tried to carry."

It wasn't until he shared his burden with James Lawson -- the civil rights leader who invited King to come to Memphis in April 1968 to support the striking garbage workers -- that Harding found relief.

Lawson said he felt no guilt over King's death. "You know Vincent, I don't carry that guilt," Harding said Lawson told him. "I know Martin wanted to come to Memphis."

The words Harding wrote for King to deliver at Riverside "were sentiments that we both shared."

Wearing a "War is Terrorism" button on his shirt, Harding took the time to personally greet people. When he took questions he asked people to give their full names, where they spent their childhoods and their mother's mother's name, information he said would tell him a lot about where they had come from.

"One need that comes to mind in light of 300 years of slavery; it's not something to say, "Let's get over it." You don't get over 300 years of that kind of treatment in a nation that was founded saying it believed in liberty and justice for all," Harding said.

"How do we make our country true to the dreams of its best people? How can we continue to become more human? How do we become more human in our schools? How do we become more human in our religious communities? How do we become more human in our families?"

"The loving creator built the capacity for great hope deep into our lives."

While it is "stylish to point out all the things Barack Obama has not done," Harding said the election of Obama as the nation's first black president was a moment in time that brought "a sense of community" in America in which people wanted "to live for something that is greater than themselves. ... It brought [people] out of their sleeping bags and into the world."

While many celebrated Obama's election, and want to push him to do the right thing, Harding said: "Ultimately the work is ours to build this country into what it needs to be."



Locally, the Rev. William Barber, North Carolina state president of the NAACP, also shared his thoughts Friday under a tent to about 200 people. Barber, who's been arrested three times in recent months protesting budget cuts to social programs, and against plans in Wake County, where Raleigh is located, to undo the county's diversity policy in public schools and replace it with "neighborhood schools," said the Tea Party has adopted the language of bigotry and racism.

Obama's election has also produced "a violent backlash that always starts with language," Barber said, such as "Take Back America." Five of the six elements of the Tea Party take their roots from hate groups, Barber said.

Some people said Obama's election would represent post-racism," Barber said. "But we know better than that."

The current Republican strategy is "to segregate voting power, wealth and educational opportunity," he said. Voter ID cards, which passed in the North Carolina General Assembly, are really about "voter suppression," Barber said.

"Tax cuts are about isolating wealth in the pockets of a few. Neighborhood schools sounds better than segregated schools."

Barber told his audience to be "deeply Pentecostal" in their approach to social justice. "We must deeply believe that we have a reservoir of the Spirit to call upon.

"God is already at the future. He's just waiting for 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 stories:

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