

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 27, 2011 at 11:23am

Tattoos, music, and 'legitimate questioning of theology'

by Patrick O'Neill



Nadia Bolz-Weber (Photos by Veronica O'Neill)

SILK HOPE, N.C. -- The Wild Goose Festival experiment began with big dreams and big hopes. In the festival program organizers wrote: "we want to change the world, of course; but that will only happen when we change ourselves."

As the inaugural festival wrapped up Sunday, many of the more than 1,500 who made the trek to Shakori Hills Farm, not far from Chapel Hill, may not have noticed global changes, but most left with a sense of mission accomplished.

Wild Goose dreamer and founder Gareth Higgins, who has been part of the Britain's Greenbelt Festival -- Wild Goose's British mother goose so to speak -- satisfied a lingering question for skeptics: "Would U.S. Christians support a gathering as eclectic and diverse as Wild Goose?"

Organizers wondered, in the U.S. -- where less tolerant, less inclusive manifestations of Christianity are abundant -- would there still be room for a festival that championed religious diversity, pluralism, the inclusion of gays and lesbians, and many open mic events where people could simply tell their stories of

love, pain, rejection, faith, joy and hope?

The answer was a resounding, "Yes," said Wild Goose board member Karla Yaconelli, who dreamed of a U.S. version of Greenbelt ever since she first travelled to England from the U.S. to attend that festival 25 years ago. Yaconelli said the task of making Wild Goose a reality "almost seemed like an impossibility."

Besides the logistics of putting on such a huge event, Wild Goose organizers had another difficult task -- getting renowned speakers and artists to come to North Carolina at their own expense, and for no compensation.

Yaconelli outlined initial reasons why she thought Wild Goose wouldn't fly in the U.S.

- "There are so many divisions in the church here in the U.S. that are so much greater or seem so much greater [than in Europe]."
- "Our culture is not ready for something like this."
- "And then, of course, there is the Christian Industrial Complex that is so already established."

"We began to wonder if it would ever be possible to have an event in the United States that could possibly be the beginning of the end of political and theological polarization and rigidity, dogma, where everyone had a seat at the table " with a willingness to have their own mind change in unexpected ways."

Well, Wild Goose happened, and what emerged from the stories people told over four days was the gathering delivered a safe place for them to tell those stories, but it was also a place for people to rise up out of their tombs of pain, despair and loneliness for the purpose of reconnecting with a God of love.

Many people who have suffered as a result of "bad religion" never return to the scenes of the crimes. Wild Goose was for those people, now hoping to find something better.

"I was raised in fundamentalism. Women couldn't even pray out loud in front of men in the tradition I was raised in, but I left that form of Christianity 25 years ago," said the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran theologian and mother of two who officiated at Saturday's Wild Goose liturgy, and spoke at several programs.

"I have scars; I just don't have wounds anymore. And a lot of people have wounds, and I understand that, but I think it's good for them to see someone who has scars instead of wounds," said Bolz-Weber. "I'm profoundly fortunate that I've been given the support and encouragement that I have to do what I'm doing."

When she decided to go into ministry, Bolz-Weber -- whose arms include multiple tattoos depicting the church year, Lazarus rolling out of a burial cloth, and Mary Magdalene -- said she received a blessing from her parents.

"I just don't know that I'll ever get that from my parents," a young, aspiring minister told Bolz-Weber while tears streaked his face. Her advice was that he seek a blessing from another source.

"If your parents cannot give you the blessings, you need to find somebody who can," said Bolz-Weber. "You need it. You need that kind of freedom instead of being in bondage. I think a lot of people here have

been in bondage, and what they're taking away from this is a blessing instead.

Wild Goose also included a small contingent of Native American Christians who introduced their audiences to diverse worship styles that interwove various tribal traditions into the program.



Richard Twiss, a Lakota/Sioux, spoke on the "implications of post-colonial Christianity," and sung Native songs.

"We should have had stricter immigration laws [for] that first boatload at Plymouth Rock," Twiss said to laughter at Sunday's closing ceremony. "That's where it all began. We gave them an inch and they took 3,000 miles."

Twiss said the Native people "have to forgive the white man every day." Many whites have approached him asking for forgiveness "and yet still live on my land, and still derive great wealth and benefit from their privilege of being a Euro-American person, and in particular being a Christian. I have to forgive them."

"I think Wild Goose has attracted a wide and remarkable community of questioners," Twiss said in an interview. Throughout history, the most privileged Christians have always been the ones to define orthodoxy, Twiss said.

"And by comparison, others are unorthodox or they're neo or they're weird or they're heretics. So Wild Goose attracts people who are engaged in some serious, legitimate questioning of those historic traditions and of contemporary theologies -- be they Calvinism or Wesleyanism or all the other categories," said Twiss.

"I don't want to say I'm trying to blend my Native ways with Christian ways as if these are two different categories. I say I'm a common human person, I'm a pitiful human being. There's only one creator. I just want to be a whole person."



The Rev. Jay Bakker, son of evangelists Jim and the late Tammy Faye Bakker, was a Wild Goose speaker. Jim and Tammy Faye, who passed away in 2007, hosted *The PTL Club*, a popular evangelical television series.

The Wild Goose program said Jay, founder of Revolution Church NYC, rose up out of drug and alcohol abuse to find "what God's grace is all about." He maintains an open and affirming ministry to the "LGBTQ community."

Over the four days, Bakker mingled with festival-goers, and even met old friends from the PTL years. He said Wild Goose was a good start because it brought together "evangelicals and high church and Catholics and people coming here and just talking about stuff that sometimes seems so taboo, and we've all had

conversations and just been able to be civil to one another, and that's kind of a refreshing thing.

?I think they've done a good job, and I think next year you'll probably see twice as many people and they'll probably be a lot more outcasts.?

Advertisement

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

Editor's Note: Over the weekend, Patrick O'Neill reported on the Wild Goose festival from Shakori Hills, N.C. For more on the festival, see his previous stories and the slideshow of photos below:

- **Wild Goose Day 3: mingling of faith traditions**
- **At 'Wild Goose,' echoes of Martin Luther King, Jr**
- **With a smearing of mud, 'Wild Goose' takes flight**
- **Part revival, part music fest: 'Wild Goose'**

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