

# Left-leaning Christians to rally around 'Wild Goose'

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DURHAM, N.C. (RNS) It's summer. It's hot. It's the South. That must mean it's time for an old-fashioned camp meeting.

Next week (June 23-26), the bygone staple of the tent revival will be reincarnated on a bucolic North Carolina farm as The Wild Goose Festival. Nearly 10 years in the making, the festival is an attempt to reimagine Christianity for the 21st century under a bigger, wider more inclusive tent.

The four-day festival is expected to draw thousands of young campers and some of the leading lights of the so-called Emergent Christianity movement.

With musicians such as David Wilcox and Michelle Shocked, and speakers such as Brian McLaren, Jay Bakker, and Shane Claiborne, festival leaders hope to establish the premier venue for 20-somethings who love God but aren't thrilled with institutional Christianity, particularly the religious right.

"We want to look each other in the eye and say, 'We may not agree on everything but we're going to recognize our essential humanity,'" said Mike Morrell, a blogger in Raleigh, N.C., and festival spokesman.

Festival planners are a diverse bunch. They include more traditional evangelicals alongside emergent church leaders, neo-monastics and progressive Christians. Organizers want to distance themselves from the politicized versions of Christianity, and re-engage in social justice work -- particularly prison reform, a topic of some of the sessions. They will converge on Shakori Hills, a 72-acre tract of forest and

meadows in North Carolina's Piedmont region, better known as the site of an annual roots music festival.

Wild Goose leaders share a conviction that there are multiple streams of Christianity flowing into one river.

"We gather to learn what Jesus came to teach us, which is not how to be a Christian, but how to be human," said festival organizer Gareth Higgins, a writer and film critic based in Durham, N.C.

Unlike other high-profile Christian events, the Wild Goose Festival will try to reverse the traditional dynamic between speakers and their audience. At least 20 of the speakers will frame questions for the audience and then sit among them as they listen to possible answers. The festival is modeled on Greenbelt, a British Christian rock festival now in its 37th year. The term "wild goose" is a Celtic metaphor for the Holy Spirit: noisy, passionate, not easily tamed and tending to flock together.

Already, the festival has drawn the ire of more conventional evangelical bloggers who don't like its inclusive nature or openness to gays and lesbians, though festival leaders have not taken any formal positions on such issues.

"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," wrote Southern Baptist blogger Ken Silva of New Hampshire-based Apprising Ministries.

Although there are several other annual U.S.-based Christian music festivals -- Creation, Cornerstone, Fishnet, to name a few -- Wild Goose is pitching bigger theological stakes. Franciscan friar Richard Rohr will lead a workshop; as will "recovering evangelical" writer Frank Schaeffer, son of the 1970s evangelical icon Francis Schaeffer.

Unlike other Christian music festivals, the musicians invited to perform at Wild Goose are not members of the praise-and-worship music pantheon or even crossover artists. They are mainstream secular musicians who happen to be Christian.

The festival's most impressive feat may be that all the speakers and performers have waived their fees, essentially appearing for free.

"There's something moving here," said David LaMotte, a Raleigh songwriter who works on peace issues for the North Carolina Council of Churches, a co-sponsor of the event. "We've created a vision. I hope it comes to pass."