A Franciscan Renaissance: needed, costly and within reach

Presentation for the 56th *Annual Franciscan Federation Conference* (AFC) June 12, 2021, a virtual experience.

- -Brian McLaren

Hi, Friends, my name is **Brian McLaren**. I have so been looking forward to having this time with you and even though I know it's virtual I hope someday we will be able to be together in body as well as in spirit and via technology. I'm going to speak to you about **a Franciscan renaissance**.

- **Needed**
- **Costly**
- **Within reach**

I should tell you I'm especially glad to be invited because I am not Catholic nor am I an official member of any Franciscan organization. I should also tell you I was a Protestant minister for 24 years. For the last sixteen years I have been a writer and speaker and public theologian and I work a lot with clergy--Catholic clergy, but especially Protestant clergy. As well I do a lot of interfaith work. I should also tell you that I have read more biographies of St. Francis than any other person except maybe Abraham Lincoln. St. Francis has been my friend, really for decades, and someone I have sought to understand and emulate. So, you can imagine how special it feels to be with you all.

In recent years I have had the added blessing and benefit of working closely with **Fr. Richard Rohr** and the *Center for Action and Contemplation*, and that friendship has only deepened my love for the Franciscan Charism and for what you all represent. As well, in the past decade I have been blessed with the friendship of **Patrick Carolan** who used to head up the **Franciscan Action Network.** That has only deepened my love for the Franciscan community.

I'd like to begin by saying a **Franciscan renaissance** is needed. You understand, I'm not saying the Franciscan status quo is needed. *I'm pleading to each of you whose heart so moves you to cast your lot with a true **Franciscan renaissance**.*

To take the spirit of St Francis and Clare;

- ➢ to take that heritage and tradition,
- ➢ that unique theological perspective
- ➢ that bias toward action and
- ➢ that option for the poor and to urge you to let that become reborn in the coming years and not to dissipate, to shrink and fade away.

I say this renaissance is needed because dominant forms of Christianity are stuck. I'll just speak very bluntly: I think the Catholic Church is stuck. I think all forms of Protestantism are stuck. I come from an evangelical background and you've probably watched with horror from a distance as the evangelical movement was so easily sucked into 'Trumpism.' And even the few leaders who tried to speak against it were ignored. Meanwhile, other voices have arisen, and they have gotten themselves stuck in a kind of white supremacist backwater where they're in many ways ruled by nostalgia and wishing they could return to some idyllic past when life made more sense to them. Mainline Protestantism — I wish this wasn't true — is in many, many ways stuck too. Yes, there are beautiful pockets of light and growth and redemption. But even though mainline Protestantism has known it was declining since the 1960's, it's been hard to break groups out of their silos and their standard operating procedures, and even when they know they are in trouble each group tends to be worried about its own future.

So, Lutherans are worried about renewing Lutheranism and Presbyterians are worried about renewing their Presbyterian silo. So, everyone is stuck in their silos. **Again there are signs of hope.**

I think we all know there are between 65 and 75 million adult Americans who grew up going to Church but who no longer do.

And the loss of **young generations,** the failure of retention of younger generations, brings us to what you might call a demographic cliff. If it were just that Christianity was in trouble because it's gotten stuck, that would be bad enough, but I think we also have to acknowledge that there are *dominant forms* of Christianity that have become dangerous. Maybe you're not super close to these but I need to tell you there are still preachers preaching, still radio preachers preaching, still priests preaching messages that are harmful. Messages for example that *Jesus is coming soon, so why do we need to worry about the environment? The Bible says that the end is going to be terrible, that things are getting worse. That just tells us that we are closer to the end. And after that it is heaven and then we will all be able to party.* And obviously I'm not expressing this charitably, but I think you understand the dangers posed by dominant forms of

the Christian religion that are becoming dangerous, especially when Christianity is mixed with white supremacy, Christianity is mixed with nationalism, and Christianity is mixed with forms of capitalism that are careless about the environment, and that for short term economic profit are willing to squander the long-term health of our planet. In short, we have a dangerous situation, but the **vision of Francis and Clare** are exactly what we need at this moment of danger and opportunity.

And let me just speak frankly. I've studied, and in many ways, been a spiritual companion of St. Francis and St. Clare through many years. But I understand many of you are experts far beyond me. So, pardon me if I show my ignorance but I want to give some examples from my limited perspective.

First, if we could ask for a tradition that was more ecological than St Francis I don't know where we would find it.

Living as we do at the precipice of an environmental catastrophe, we need a spirituality … we need a vision that integrates a love for God, love for the neighbor and love for the earth.

And of course in a thousand different ways this was the vision of **St Francis and St Clare** and the movements that they gave birth too. This is what they embodied, from a **friendship with a wolf** to the **preaching to the birds**. And we all know how these have turned into cute little tropes but listen, this vision is now a matter of life and death for civilization.

Second, consider St.Francis 'nonviolence — a commitment we desperately need at this time when millions, if not billions, of people think that the more guns we have the safer we'll be, the more bombs we have the safer we'll be. So, in a sense, you can never have too many guns and bombs. And we know that this is a suicidal trajectory for our species. ***We need a spirituality that is deeply nonviolent***.

I'll tell you a quick anecdote, a few years ago I was invited to an important gathering of **Christian and Muslim leaders** and at the last minute I couldn't go but I wanted to be there so much. So, I asked a friend of mine if he would go in my place. He took copious notes and sent them to me, and he couldn't bear to just keep taking notes, so during a break he called me. He said "*I wish you could have been there this last hour.* ***A Muslim speaker*** *gave a very brilliant, erudite lecture.* Then someone asked '*Do you think the future of Islam can be peaceful?'* This speaker said, 'I*t can be. The core of our teaching is peace.'* ***But then he said, 'We have a problem in Islam. We have no St Francis.*** *Our great leaders were warriors.'"*

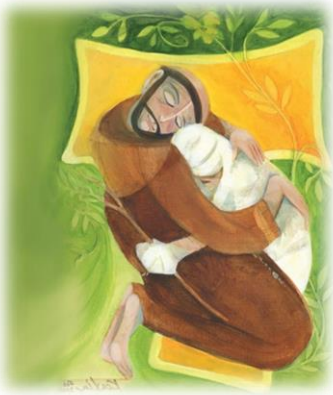
He may have been overstating it. He came from a Sunni background and I think we can point to Sufi leaders who were peaceful. But he was saying for the lack of St Francis it's very hard for us to lift up a nonviolent future when so many of our leaders of our past were violent. And as my friend shared this with me all I could think of is the same is true in Christianity if not for St Francis.

Third, I think the Franciscan vision is deeply economic, and you all know a larger and larger percentage of wealth is being concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals and families. So that now in spite of the word *democracy* and the word *capitalism* what we are really experiencing globally increasingly is a kind of feudal *oligarchy*… where a small number of powerful families overlap with governments and overlap with crime and crime syndicates and sadly overlap with religions which give them cover. The flow of wealth to a tiny group of people is so obscene and of course **St. Francis** arose in the early stages of modern capitalism and he saw its potential dangers. His example and his passion and his alternative value system are so needed now.

Fourth, St Francis and St. Clare clearly modeled *deep inclusiveness*. We all can imagine St. Francis embracing a leper, embracing the poor.

This is the **inclusiveness** we need at this moment. It is not an inclusiveness that says we're elite and we're going to bring a few of you as tokens into our exclusive club.

It's the **inclusiveness** of showing solidarity with the people at the bottom and saying that my life and your life are interconnected….



and I refuse to be happy, I refuse to be satisfied, I refuse to settle for my own happiness, because my life is in solidarity with yours as my neighbor. This **inclusiveness** flows into an egalitarian spirit. The relationship between **Francis and Clare** begins to model this: the sense that we're all equal—rich and poor, Pope and Bishop and lay person. That we take seriously our equality and that this equality would even include Christian and Muslim, Jew and Atheist. This spiritual egalitarianism means we take seriously our shared human belovedness before God. I would also add that at this moment we need the **artistic dimension of the Franciscan tradition …** even the Friars who go about singing from town to town. In a time of great ugliness, we need to bring live and local beauty into this world.

***Part of the change we need is a change that comes from the arts, from creative beauty*.**

Of great importance at this moment: **St Francis represents an inter-faith vision**. Seeing Francis venturing into the Sultan of Egypt camp in Egypt, and being willing to stand before him with no weapons but with a message of peace - a **desire for peace**. This vision has been

tragically lost in so much of our Christian faith. The fact that there are Catholics and Protestants at the forefront of every war, calling for war. As a Protestant I've been shocked when I meet sectors of the Catholic community that in a sense are still fighting the crusades. The hatred for Muslims is just heartbreaking. But I'm less surprised to see hostility that among Protestants because it is so deeply rooted in Protestant history and so pervasive and so driven by fear.

So at this moment, we need the vision of Francis and Clare for an interfaith solidarity.

I also think we are in trouble **theologically**. Whenever I say the word "*God*" I'm importing images of a big white guy in the sky sitting on a big throne who is a dictator and a despot and who will subject people to cruelty if they don't honor this potentate appropriately. It grieves me to say this. You know the older I get the more I want to speak of God but every time I say the word, "*God*" I'm afraid: "A*m I importing that distorted vision?"*

We have deep theological work to do.

When I look back over the last eight centuries I have to say that again and again the Franciscan instinct was to go to the right place in speaking of God and helping us get a fresh vision of God. A different understanding of God leads to different understanding of atonement and meaning of the cross. A fresh vision of God leads to a fresh vision of everything everywhere.

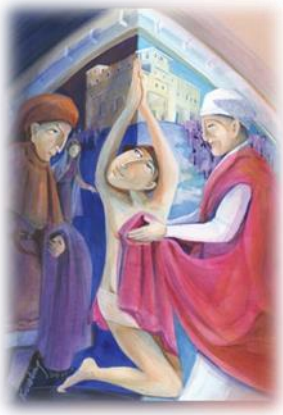
And so, this theological deposit that you have — the Franciscan theological trajectory that you have — is so powerful. That brings us to the **embodied *spirituality* of the Franciscans** that refuses to separate piety from **social justice and social action in care and compassion for those in need**. That becomes deeply practical.

Around the world I know Franciscans are **protecting land** and obviously with hospitals and schools are demonstrating care for the vulnerable in such practical ways. Thank God for the wonderful Franciscan intellectuals and scholars, and thank God that there is always this Franciscan bias for ***practical*** expression — and ***political*** expression — of scholarship.

The more I reflect on **St Francis's life, I think he was brilliant politically.**

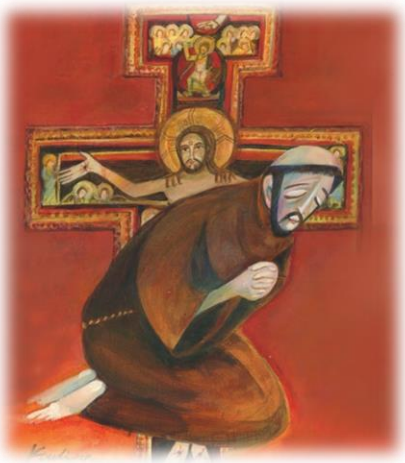
He knew which fights were matters of ego that would have no effect in the world and would just stir up a counter action. He was a master of protest! Consider young Francis standing

naked in the marketplace, confronting his father as an act of protest against the controlling dimensions of wealth and how his entire society was being transformed by wealth. And his father, a cloth merchant, was part of this because when you want to move up the ladder you need to demonstrate your superiority through clothing. And in the face of all this, there is Francis standing naked… **you understand that is an act of protest! That is an act of civil disobedience!**



There is a secular dimension to Franciscanism: by secular I mean **caring about what's going on in the world** and not just what's going on in the church. There is a saying: *The greatest threat to Christianity is Christianity preoccupied with its own self-preservation.*

This concern for the world that's out there — this **global concern** for the secular world — needs to be spread around the world. Finally, the Franciscan community remains accessible to people. So, a Protestant like me could be welcome in Franciscan settings. You don't have to be a scholar. You can just be someone who wants to help people and then there's a welcome, an open door into the Franciscan community. Do you see why I say the Franciscan charism is so greatly needed at this time?



Many of us have deep despair about the future of Christianity unless the treasures you all have can be more widely disseminated.

But I need to be honest. This **renaissance** that we need is **also costly**. If renewal were cheap, easy, and convenient, it would have happened already. So, we have to be willing to count the cost, commit to the challenge, and persist through obstacles, and to do all of that in the Franciscan Spirit.

You know I speak to a lot of clergy. I'm probably one of the four or five people that speak to the most Protestant clergy in an average year, although with Covid it has been very different. But the thing I can tell you is that most religious institutions are "in irons." You know that phrase from sailing. When you've lost the wind, you're stuck. When you've lost the wind, your sails aren't propelling you. They're just flopping. And that sense of having lost the wind, of not working with the Spirit, I sense that everywhere I look. I was a pastor for 24 years. Almost every day I have a couple e-mails in my inbox from pastors and other Christian leaders who are weary from working so hard. I just got a heart-breaking note from a young Protestant pastor,

one of the really gifted young leaders. He said, *"If I didn't have three children to raise, I'd pull the rip chords and I'd be out of here immediately."*

The system is preoccupied with institutional self-preservation, not with the Gospel… not with God's love for the whole world. As a result, many are disillusioned. Many are bitter because they've seen behind the curtain, and they've seen corruption, and they've even seen criminality. Of course, any sensible person would feel disillusioned. And then many people are afraid because they love the Church so much. They see it is on a trajectory of decline. Meanwhile many are living with compliant disillusionment. They are compliant, but they are also very bitter. Still others are living in a delusion of institutional security. The church will always be here. Everything will always be as it is. ***So many people just assume everything will be as it is.*** Many of us know that just is not true; the future will not be an extension of the past. Many know the long-term future just doesn't look good for our religious institutions in their present configuration. So a lot of folks are just trying to hold on until retirement: "*Let the institutions last long enough to pay my pension.*"

Look, part of me is disappointed in that, but part of me is sympathetic to it. I understand, especially when people feel like," *Look, I am working for this company, I am working for this organization whose leaders have not been courageous enough to do the courageous thing that courageously needs to be done. They've only worried about self-preservation. So, I understand this organization is in decline. And I've given my life to it. It's not my fault that this organization is the way it is. I've given my life to it so I am just holding on until retirement."*

A Lutheran pastor came up to me a few years ago. *"You know, I like your books, but I just don't think it is going to work.* Because everywhere I go, it just seems that we Christian clergy are ***busy micro-managing our own decline***".

As we know, we get older and our health begins to deteriorate. I remember in the last few year of my parents lives, it was almost a full-time job just getting them to all of their medical appointments. It's exhausting as you're **micro-managing your own decline.** And so, for us to break out of that downward momentum within Christian institutions, for us to break out of that inertia, it's going to take an awful lot.

Many groups have become aware that they are facing organizational collapse. They don't know if they're just going to fade away or if they're just going to become a souvenir. Of course, sincere Franciscans feel the danger of just becoming a souvenir, and of Assisi just being a religious Disneyworld — or Francis world. That would be such a tragedy. Many religious organizations are fearing a hostile takeover, because there are conservative political and economic forces out that are very activist, even aggressive. I'm just going to say it this way: some people with a lot of money, who prefer conservative political and economic policies, see groups like Franciscans and others as a potential threat because of your advocacy for the poor

and for political policies that help the poor. I don't know the details in the Franciscan world, but I will tell you in the Protestant world there have been serious concentrated efforts to take over any organization that doesn't promote a kind of conservative political and economic vision. As a result, many Christian leaders just want to hunker down. "*Let's preserve our little thing. Let's hide our light under a bushel so we don't get so much attention."*

I hate to say it, but it reminds me of the parable of Jesus where we bury our talents in the ground and just try to hold onto what we have. But we find out, as Jesus said, that if we try to seize safety and security, that's actually the way to make it squeeze through our fingers.

So what we face is costly, but I believe our dangers are also opportunities.

I think about **the parable of the salmon.**

The **little salmon** fry hatch in the streams and then they move downstream to one of the Great Lakes or out into the ocean. As they make their way down the stream, they have a good life, flowing with the current. For a long time, they thrive, they grow, they prosper. But when they mature, when they get old, something happens. That's when they *go on the greatest adventure of their lives*. You'd think that's the time when they would just sit back and retire. But that's when they launch their most challenging and important work of all. They fight their way back up those streams that they haven't visited since they were just little tiny minnows. They go back, they reproduce, and they make possible the next generation of salmon.

And so what might seem impossible, **with God is in reach**. And that's why I say that even though the possibility of Franciscan renaissance is **costly**, it is within reach. You're already heading upstream.

I think we have to acknowledge what has been happening in the Franciscan Community since 1982 is truly significant.

As I have been gradually introduced to some of your recent history through my involvement with you all, I've just got to say, it's not been an easy time, I know. But the pieces are in place. I'm so impressed by the progress you have made in the last year as you prepared for this historic gathering. ***The steps you have taken over the past year are courageous***. This is promising progress. You're not just micromanaging your own decline. Now, look, I don't want to get overly comfortable, because two years from now you can slip back into that decline-management mindset.

But It seems to me you have lit the spark to imagine a genuine Franciscan Renaissance.

I'd like to share with you a couple of insights from systems theory that might help you seize this moment. In systems theory (and really all of this **flows from ecology**, because ecology was really the first field of systems theory), they say the healthier the system, the healthier the subsystems. So, you've got a pond and in that pond are bull frogs, large mouthed bass, bluegill sunfish and a family of herons that walk around the pond. The system is the pond and the subsystems are the bass family, the frog family, the heron family, and so on. If the pond is not healthy, no amount of effort of the bass or the bullfrogs or herons is going to improve their lot. The larger system has to be healthy for all the parts of the system to be healthy.

And now here's something interesting. If some of the subsystems begin to grow stronger than they have been, they can upset the balance, they can weaken the whole system I am experiencing this now in West Florida. We have Burmese pythons from Southeast Asia that are spreading across Florida. For a couple of decades they've been spreading across the Florida peninsula. Wherever they go, you know the pythons are there, because you don't see raccoons, opossums, or rabbits. The bird population is also plummeting in some places.

What happens is if the subsystem of pythons is not kept in check, it grows stronger and weakens the whole system. So you need to attend to the beautiful balanced symbiosis of a healthy system to have healthy subsystems …

- **It seems to me** that you must pay attention to the health of the larger Franciscan System. How can we make the ***larger system healthy*** so that the parties can become partners and seek the common good of the larger system?

- **And it seems to me** that if you want to be truly wise in the **Franciscan Renaissance,** you will not just try to build a better Franciscan system so that the Franciscan parties can become Franciscan partners for the common good of the Franciscan system. You will think bigger. You will seek the **Common Good** of the world at large.

- **It seems to me** that you can be truly wise in this ***moment of Franciscan Renaissance*** and not just try to build a better Franciscan system, not even just try to build a better Catholic or Christian system but to think bigger and say: "***Our vision has to be as big as the world*.**" The purpose of our Franciscan system is to contribute to a regenerative **global eco-system and to a collaborative global social system.**

And whatever we do to help ourselves, to help our Franciscan system, the goal is always for its contribution to the greater good.

One more insight from systems thinking. The broader the network, the safer the nodes. Now you understand in a lot of *economic* thinking you just want to keep control of everything yourself. You want to have a monopoly of something and you're safe if you have a monopoly of something. But in systems thinking you say, "No. If you're building a broader network, the entire network becomes safe. So, in turn, each node is safer because of the larger network." So, it strikes me that there has never been a better time ***to not stay in a silo***, but instead, to find ways to build strength with what you have and then to welcome all and participate actively in broader networks.

So, I ask myself:

- **What if a vital ecumenical Franciscan movement** were not just worried about its survival but committed itself to a ***global*** **renaissance**, and
- **What if** that group began to get traction in collaboration with secular and religious movements who are working on the shared common good **of our world**?
- **What if** every time a group of environmentalists were working on an environmental project they said, "We've got to get the Franciscans involved? Wherever they get involved they bring something really special. **We need the Franciscans involvement**."
- **What if** the Franciscans were involved in a project to address poverty in a certain area, and the Franciscan said "You know there is a Muslim group that is working with needy people in this community and there's a Jewish group, and there's a secular group.

It's part of our charism, part of our spirit to cross borders and to make relationships.

And so, let's work together in that process."

- **What if**, Franciscans were to say, because we all know that one of the great challenges and struggles of our world today is this resurgence of White Supremacy, **what if** Franciscans were to say, "We are going to try to diversify our government, and to diversify our community, but we're **not** just going to try to include people of color in a largely white organizations." We're going to do whatever we can there, but we're also going to say, *"Let's bring everything we offer in service of groups and movements that that are already being organized and led by people of color."* You understand. If a **vital ecumenical Franciscan group** were to join with other diverse movements in pursuit of a better world, addressing the primary challenges of the world today, this can be truly, truly inspiring.

I ask myself:

- **What if** a rich spiritual movement of aging leaders were to exercise a ***preferential option for the young***? And I'd like to close with this. I'm working on a book called ***Do I Stay Christian*** and the book was way too long, and so I had to take out several thousand words. This is the section that I took out of the book, and I am sort of happy to recycle it with you. So, it won't be in the book. It mentions **St. Francis** and it mentions **St. Clare.** This little image you'll see is a painting someone did of St. Clare to remind us of how young she was when she was invited by Francis who was just a couple of years older to become a partner in leading others.

When a progressive spiritual movement **like the one Jesus launched** stops moving forward entirely, or moves at the pace of a glacier before global warming, or even worse, when it actively regresses, we need to ask whether it still reflects the ethos of **its thirty year-old founder** who was dead by thirty-three. It's unlikely that people much older than Jesus would follow him, so we can assume that his first disciples were at least young-ish, too.

Of course, those young disciples who weren't martyred eventually grew old, and special honor was no doubt given to the senior leaders of the movement. Within a century, the youthful vigor of the original movement became harder to detect, with internal turf wars, power struggles, and belief-policing replacing the founder's original outward vision of

✓ speaking truth to power,

✓ proclaiming liberation to the oppressed, and

✓ deploying nonviolent peacemakers willing to die as witnesses to peace.

That outward vision would gradually become the exception rather than the rule, occasionally flaring up in a young reformer like **Francis of Assisi**, who began his ministry in his early twenties. **Clare** joined him when she was only eighteen, and

soon was leading her parallel movement. **St. Teresa of Avila** ran away from home at twenty to begin her visionary work, and **St. John of the Cross** joined her movement when he was twenty-five. Among Protestants, **Martin Luther** was thirty-three when he nailed his ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg door (as the story goes). **John Calvin** was nineteen when he began writing his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and twenty-six when the first edition was published.

The Christian movement, at its most vital, has been a ***youth movement***. The Christian movement, at its most depressing, has been a ***gerontocracy.***

The wisest thing older generations of white Christians could do starting now would be to invest ***unprecedented*** trust, money, opportunity, and coaching (without control) in rising younger generations, woman and men, of diverse racial and economic backgrounds, listening to them, learning from them, trusting the Spirit to be alive in them, and then *getting behind them*. If we are to stay Christian, it cannot be with the old white boys 'club of the religious gerontocracy at the helm.

Yes, we need true elders as much as ever, if not more. Instead of hoarding their power and wisdom, they can choose to empower and equip younger leaders, especially leaders from groups that have been historically marginalized.

But the sad truth is that conventional Christianity depresses, disillusions, drains, and drives away many of its brightest and best by the time they hit **thirty**. Those with seniority status occupy leadership positions, sometimes because they embody the spirit and vision of our founder, but often, because the system rewards compliance and fears repentance, which means having a second thought, a new thought, a fresh way of seeing.

So my brothers and sisters of Francis, you are taking the first steps toward a **Franciscan Renaissance** now. You are already embarked. The next steps are becoming clearer.

I believe from the bottom of my heart that the greatest work of Francis and Clare may still be ahead of us.

I believe in a Franciscan Renaissance: needed, costly and within reach.

And I just want to say if I can be of help in any way I'll be glad to, because I know I, and my children, and my grandchildren's children will be beneficiaries. You are giving birth. Thank you very much. God bless you.

This Franciscan Federation address was transcribed by Sisters Jeanne Nisley and Dominica LoBianco, *Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia*

ART: Francis with Gospel book – title from Assisi, 2013; Dancing Clare – Sarah Duque, *Centro Francescano Internazionale per il Dialogo, Piazzetta S.Spagnoli, 1* Assisi, Italia

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Brian McLaren

Brian McLaren is an author, speaker, activist, and public theologian. A former college English teacher and pastor, he is a passionate advocate for "a new kind of Christianity" – just, generous, and working with people of all faiths for the common good.

Brian holds two Doctor of divinity honorary degrees from Carey Theological Seminary, Vancouver, BC and Virginia Theological Seminary (Episcopal) respectively together with an MA in English from the University of Maryland.

Coming from a rich experience as pastor (Cedar Ridge Community Church), and mentor among emerging missional congregations, Brian McLaren' leadership is well known across the US and Canada, Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. His public speaking addresses postmodern thought and culture, Biblical studies, church leadership and spiritual formation, pastoral survival and burnout, interreligious dialogue, and global crises.

Brian has authored over 15 books, one even for children, "Cory and the Seventh Story". Those of the last decade include "A New Kind of Christianity", "We Make the Road by Walking", "The Great Spiritual Migration", "Faith After Doubt". His new 2022 release, "And Do I Stay Christian?" helps struggling Christians address the questions of whether and how to stay Christian when the term can mean irreconcilable things. These books have been translated into 8 languages including Korean, Chinese, Swedish and Portuguese.

Among key media resources, Brian McLaren's work has been covered in Time, New York Times, Christianity Today, The Washington Post, CNN.com and many other print and online media.

Brian is married to Grace, and they have four adult children and five grandchildren. His personal interests include wildlife and ecology, fly fishing and kayaking, music and songwriting, and literature.