

Companions in the wilderness

Evolving Faith's Sarah Bessey and Jeff Chu believe that a person's deconstruction can't just be for them.

[Jon Mathieu](#) interviews [Sarah Bessey](#) and [Jeff Chu](#)

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Sarah Bessey and Jeff Chu are coleaders of [Evolving Faith](#), an organization Bessey founded with Rachel Held Evans in 2018. The ministry consists of an annual conference, a podcast, and a new online community. Bessey lives in Calgary and is author of several books, including Jesus Feminist. Chu lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is author of Does Jesus Really Love Me?, and serves as teacher-in-residence at Crosspointe Church in Cary, North Carolina.

How would you describe Evolving Faith to someone who's never heard of it?

Sarah Bessey: When Rachel Held Evans and I began to talk about putting together a weekend retreat in 2016 or so, we were looking for something that we wished we had had during the season of life now called “deconstruction.” It goes by a lot of names. We tend to use the metaphor of a wilderness.

At that first Evolving Faith gathering in Montreat, North Carolina, we realized this was more than just a onetime event. This wilderness was an unshepherded space. We came home from that first gathering, which Jeff spoke at, and began to dream about what Evolving Faith could be and has now become: the conference itself, a podcast, and the online community.

Jeff Chu: One of the realizations that Rachel and Sarah and all of us speakers had that first year was the depth of hunger and thirst that we encountered in the audience. We realized Evolving Faith was something of an oasis—both for folks who were estranged from the church and for folks who were still in the church.

Yes, people who grew up evangelical and no longer found themselves there gravitated toward the retreat. But so did a lot of mainline folks, who loved the social justice component of their churches but were missing some Jesus, some Holy Spirit, some of the emotional and theological underpinnings behind the justice. I don't think any of us expected that—and honestly, I was a little frightened by the angry ex-evangelical crowd.

SB: Some of the feedback that first year was from people who were surprised by how Jesus-y we were. For folks who knew me and Rachel, it probably wasn't a huge surprise. But we were clear: this is still our story. We are still centered around our endless fascination with Jesus. We want to grapple with what that means in the world.

The newest component of Evolving Faith is the online community. What is this community and how do people participate in it?

JC: I would say it's like church coffee hour but without the awkwardness. People can bring questions about scripture, questions about parenting, questions they're afraid to ask in church—because they've been told that the questions are impertinent, or heretical, or impolite. They can bring the burdens of their everyday lives.

Sometimes they'll find answers, but more often they'll find solidarity and belonging. It's been really beautiful to see the ways in which members of the community have done what community at its best does: rally around those who are feeling alone and hopeless, so that they can borrow a little bit of hope from someone else. Isn't that what we want from other human beings? Isn't that what we want to give to other human beings?

We have specific spaces or "rooms" for queer folks, for BIPOC folks, for disabled folks, for people with particular identities who might feel a little more comfortable being around others who can understand those identities. And then we have the broader spaces. We have a space devoted to discussing the podcast, so that people who have been listening can talk with others who might be wrestling with some of the things they heard on the podcast.

SB: Given that metaphor of wilderness over these years, we have the image of little oases or feasts in the wilderness—maybe it's a bonfire or a shared table. Maybe it's not forever, but it's a moment of sanctuary, of rest, of belonging and connection.

An online community emerged for us as a priority after the first 2020 online live conference. We had lost Rachel in 2019, and our grief was very much an open wound at our 2019 gathering. Jeff and I thought really long and hard about moving forward without her. And then, of course, 2020 hit. I think we planned the 2020 conference top to bottom no less than three times. Like everybody else during the pandemic, we were on a huge learning curve.

After the 2020 conference, we became curious: How do you build an online community? What does an online community mean for those who can't gather in person? I think we always had an awareness of that question, but in 2020 the fact that this is a justice issue locked into place for us.

It was amazing to see not just people who, for financial reasons or accessibility reasons, had not been able to access the conference in the past, but also a new international audience. I'm Canadian, and so there were a lot of us. We ended up having people from every continent, didn't we, Jeff? Except Antarctica, I guess.

JC: We were hoping for someone at a polar station, but that didn't happen.

SB: But that was the point when we recognized that learning how to cultivate online spaces well, learning how to care for one another in them well, is not just something

that's nice to have. For a lot of people, it's a real lifeline. It's worth investing in; it's worth focusing on all year round.

Gathering people from so many religious backgrounds must involve some profound disagreement, theological and otherwise. What do you do to create room for people who perhaps disagree pretty strongly?

JC: We do have moderators, but it's really down to the community to show up as their best selves, to risk the vulnerability that it takes to make a community, and to have the presence of mind and heart to show up for one another. For the most part, people do that well without much nudging from us.

Also, we never characterize the online community as a "safe space." That's actually a term I find really objectionable, especially in the context of the church. You are going to run into things that make you uncomfortable. That's the reality of living in community. We're not all the same. We have extraordinarily rich and diverse stories and ways of experiencing and viewing the world. So what do we do? We summon the grace and the love and the mercy that we are all looking to be extended to us, and then we try to extend it to folks.

SB: We value creating a hospitable space because we have been in inhospitable places. We have been in places where our questions, our doubts, or even our very identities have not been fully welcome.

If people are looking for a lot of big arguments—proving a point, throwing weight around—that's not our space, and I think people pick up on that pretty quick.

JC: Probably the widest range of diversity in thought, and a really common topic of conversation in the community, is scripture. Sarah and I love the Bible. It's rare that we'll write something that doesn't have some allusion to scripture. There are folks in our community who cannot, for whatever reason, even bring themselves to open up a Bible. It angers them. There's too much pain. We have folks who think it's a lovely work of literature, albeit flawed. And yet we can have fascinating, in-depth, rich conversations about these things without dehumanizing each other.

How do we manage that? I think it's partly mutual respect. It's partly honoring that folks have, for some good reason, ended up together in this space, and our curiosity and our mutuality are going to get us farther than our rightness about our interpretation of these old stories.

Is Evolving Faith a church? If not, what do you view as its relationship with the church or local churches?

SB: Not a church.

JC: Not a church.

SB: It's funny. We've had some over the years who have said, "We should start our own church thing," and Jeff and I say, "No. That's not it." In terms of our relationship with the church, we do have a lot of diversity within the Christian tradition that shows up in our community: from mainline to evangelical to people who have shipwrecked out of each. We have a lot of folks who don't know what they think and who come from very different traditions.

We also see a lot of current and former pastors and ministry leaders finding their way there. It's a very particular grief or unraveling that can happen when you've been in ministry.

Jeff, what do you think about our connection with the church? Are we a pocket universe?

JC: I have pretty strong feelings on this. We are not here to replace the church. My bias is that I hope that folks would find, in this little oasis, the reminders of their belovedness to God. Then I hope they perceive that they need to go back out into their own churches and be the church that they want.

SB: One of our most active conversation groups in the online space is people looking for churches.

JC: Yes. There is a hunger, but there's also so much disappointment, and there's so much fear. Because the church has not met people where they are, has not created space for people as they are, has not been a space of belonging and a place of holy curiosity. People are looking for good news; people are looking for living water; people are looking for the bread of life, and instead they're finding crumbs, if that.

So if we can hang out together a little bit, and in the process remind folks that God loves them, and that God equips them and empowers them, maybe they can start to be that presence for their neighbor, in their home congregation or in a church that they are just setting foot into for the first time. Maybe they can start to build that for someone else.

I know that some of the folks who show up have been so wounded by church that they probably won't ever set foot in one again. But my bias, my clear bias that I'm not ashamed of, is that I hope they will be part of the church and help to make it the thing God is calling it to be.

SB: I love the church with my whole heart. Sometimes against my better judgment.

Sarah, you said that early on, people were surprised to see how Jesus-y you all are. For the two of you, are there specific parts of your own faith that are particularly important in grounding the work that you do with Evolving Faith?

SB: During my own first major experience with deconstruction, it was learning about Jesus—following Jesus, or trying to—that gave me new life at a time when I had a lot of questions and doubts. It was the beauty of the gospel, really, that ruined everything. That became the lens for me.

In my own personal faith, I've never quite gotten over Jesus. I don't know that I ever will. I still have a sense that this is good news—and that it has to be good news for everyone. I love scripture, I love the church, I love this language, I love communion, and I love singing together. And we still get that.

Nobody gets to take that away from you. Nobody gets to take away your belovedness, your belonging. Nobody gets to take Jesus away from you.

JC: For me, it's trinitarian theology. It matters a lot to me and to my understanding of God's love that we can see that love expressed through God's wild creativity and imagination as God the Creator, and God's sacrifice through Jesus, who redeems us and intercedes for us, and then also God's companionship through the Spirit.

These various facets of God's persons are really important to me, to my theology, and to my understanding of the place that Evolving Faith has for the world. I think despite our different contexts, Sarah and I do share that heart for good news and our desire for it to be good news for all people.

SB: Even if I love "Jesus is my boyfriend" songs more than Jeff does.

What hopes and dreams do you have for the future of Evolving Faith?

JC: My hope and dream is that the church will be what God has always been calling it to be, such that our work is irrelevant. Because if people truly find belonging in the church, our work won't be necessary anymore.

SB: There is something Jeff first said at our 2019 gathering, and we've talked about it ever since: your deconstruction can't just be for you. If it's just a conversation about atonement over an IPA at the pub with your buds, then that's not what this is. A lot of our vision, a lot of our hope, is that the people who are hungry and thirsty become the ones who not only receive what they need for their hunger and their thirst but then become the ones who are bearing water and bread for others.

Our vision for folks, for ourselves, and for Evolving Faith as an organization is not about the boundaries and litmus tests, who's in and who's out, or ticking boxes on someone else's imaginary star chart. It's about embodied, living hope in the world, what we really truly believe about the nature and character of God, and how we love, care for, and create belonging with and justice for one another.

JC: I think about Isaiah 61 a lot: proclaiming good news, binding up the brokenhearted, declaring liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, and comforting those who mourn, giving them the oil of gladness. I think that is a communal call. On our good days, we try to live into that.

SB: I think both Jeff and I have found ourselves in this work, at times reluctantly. I don't know that either one of us ever imagined this as an aspect of our vocation.

JC: I still don't.

SB: We don't see ourselves as the leaders in the wilderness so much as companions. We see ourselves as alongside our community, carving out the space for conversation and belonging, even if it's just for a short season of someone's life. It's not Jeff and I proclaiming that good news to this wonderful community; they are the magic here. They're the ones who are proclaiming it to one another. They're the ones who are finding one another, encouraging one another, speaking life to one another, and then seeing that ripple out into their lives. It just feels like we're very fortunate to have a front-row seat.