



Choosing Not to Go It Alone:
More with Jon Mathieu
October 26, 2023



Transcript

Sara Hayden: You've described elements of practicing contemplation. You've described what the church calls the “fellowship of the believers” and getting to know each other and being in harmony with each other, wishing each other well, You've described scriptural reflection. You've described application in our daily lives. To do that in the way the mid 20th century programmatic model of the church was set up, you would have to be at church at least several hours walking into like different spaces. We have worship in here, and then we go into a place like a classroom, and then we have our learning...

Jon Mathieu: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ...and then we go to another place to do this kind of thing.

Jon: There's magically a whole kitchen somewhere where there's a luncheon is happening. Yeah.

Sara: Right. Exactly. And there's, I mean it's just, like, this cloistered in a way, a very specific environment that practically speaking has, you know, large footprint. But you are able to bring, let's say twenty-five, thirty plus, at times, context visibly onto the screen, that is so representative of, when I think about the Universal Church. It's representative of who we are and the various places in which the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is embodied when we're together. I just think that's lovely.

Jon: Thanks. Me too.

Sara: Do you ever ask yourself when someone is preparing to share, like, what's the worst that could happen? Or, like, when you got together, and y'all met in New York from three different countries, people who are members of Harbor Online or participants part of that community come together are you like, well what's the worst that could happen?

Jon: Yes. I would say in the beginning I was pretty blasé.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: And just like, what's the worst that could happen in a kind of a dismissive way?

Sara: Right. Yeah.

Jon: Well, and then some of the worst things happened. So learned to just like make changes to keep the space a little bit safer to be frank.

Sara: Okay. Yeah.

Jon: Like early on in our life cycle...

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: ...we had a visitor come first time there and kind of just took up a lot of space...

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: ...talked a lot, including some transphobic language and we had a couple trans people on the call. This is about as bad as it can be.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: So we did some follow up with the folks who may have been hurt by some of the things that were said. We did a lot of – tried to do a lot of follow up with the person who was there for the first time. And the biggest thing that came from it for the future was we realized we really need to create some norms around our time spent together on Zoom.

Sara: Hmm.

Jon: And it was wild that we had gone any amount of time without norms.

Sara: How far were you into- like - it could have been a month or like six months...

Jon: Yeah, we'd only been like an official community that like existed for probably a month or two.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: So it was pretty early, but still it felt like, wow, how do we live without these? And so our leaders, our, we had a little team of volunteer leaders, we just had a meeting and like talked and like somewhat prayerfully discerned together. Like what norms would be really helpful for us to maintain not just a safe space, but a safe and loving and nurturing, caring space for people to gather on a Thursday night on Zoom. And so one of the norms that we added was if you're here for the first time, we invite you to take on the role of a listener.

Sara: Wow.

Jon: And we still have moments when we do our facilitated discussions or the icebreaker rooms, we do invite the first time folks to chime in, but we just wanna, like, let them know that even though they are invited to talk at select times in the meeting, their first time there, it's really important to hear what the community is like, to hear what the other people are bringing to the table, their different identities and perspectives. So we try to make that really the theme of someone's first visit.

Sara: Yeah. It makes me think of something, Priya Parker who wrote this great book, *The Art of Gathering*, and is like a strategic thought leader. She calls, well she refers to as “more is not always merrier” or <laugh> “generous exclusion”. Like, how do gatherings that matter? How does a host – and that could be a pastor, that could be a president of the PTO or it could be the person that's throwing the baby shower – how do they practice generous exclusion and how does that allow them to make the gathering what it can be; and certainly as you've very practically illustrated, to let it be a place where people can thrive and not experience trauma?

Jon: Mm-hmm. That sounds like a great book, honey, to look into that.

Sara: It is a great book. And her most significant point is that events that happen that could be very common events in a society, such as a birthday party, can be so much more if people are shown and invited to participate in that event meaningfully. So let's say it's somebody's eightieth birthday party: the fact that it's a birthday party doesn't mean anything. It doesn't tell you what the meaning behind the event is. It doesn't dictate its purpose. So you might say, “Stan is turning eighty. We want to shower him with reflections on what he has meant to our community and we invite you who are coming to bring like an object that illustrates something about Stan that you really cherish. And we're gonna go around the circle and lift those up and say a couple of words about that.” I mean, it's a simple thing, but it could be really life-changing for certainly Stan <laugh>, you know, at his eightieth birthday versus like, well, does he want a polo shirt or like a gift certificate to the golf place or <laugh>.

Jon: Yeah. Let's all sing Happy Birthday in a slow, minor key...

Sara: ...like a funereal dirge ...

Jon: ...that sounds like a dirge. Yeah, for sure.

Sara: <laugh> We're on the same page. I wanted to ask you about some of the asynchronous aspects to Harbor Online, like the ways in which people connect with one another - not necessarily scheduled times, like your main Thursday gathering. And you mentioned something called Circle, which is like a platform.

Jon: Yeah, I mean I think most people are familiar with a Facebook group.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: If somehow someone listening to this podcast has never experienced a Facebook group before, it's a space online where a group of people can all participate, but only that group of people. And you post things just like you would make a normal post on a social media site, but the only people who are going to see that post are the people who are in that group.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: We have a space that's for all of Harbor, so you can post stuff there and every person in Harbor Online community who has signed up for our circle platform...

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: ...will see that post, will have a chance to like it, respond to it. Then there's all these little smaller channels. There's an outdoor one where people just post beautiful hiking pictures, for instance, and there's several others.

Sara: Yeah, it sounds intentional.

Sara: Do you have, like, a bucket list technology that, like, a tool that you want to see utilized by your community? Or are you like pretty satisfied with kind of what you have right now?

Jon: I think what we have is serving us well.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: Moving to the Circle was a big adjustment and it felt like a pretty big risk for us. I mean, it's not a free resource. We had been using a Facebook group before.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: And it just, not only my reservations about Facebook.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: But also for a few other reasons, it just didn't seem like the best fit for our community to be able to connect with each other throughout the week. So we made that move and we had some trepidation about, like, will people embrace this random little corner of the internet called the Circle that they've never heard of before?

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: But we're really happy with Circle Zoom is, I love Zoom. I, we, we all feel fluent in Zoom at this point in the world...

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: ...and at Harbor.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: We just started creating video content that's just an inside thing. It's not meant to go out into the world.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: But like folks who don't come to Harbor every week, which is most folks at Harbor. In fact, speaking of Gina, I'm excited for to hear your conversation with Gina about technology.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: Gina said something to one of my co-pastors that like revolutionized one of our values. She said to Dottie, my co-pastor, freedom is healing.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: And she was talking about the freedom to not attend a faith community is healing.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: And we started kind of radically embracing that. I mean, we stopped just short of telling people stop coming to Harbor.

Sara: Yeah. <laugh>

Jon: We still wanna see their faces on the screen. We love them, but, like, if you feel like I just need a night to not do this high intensity dialogue thing, don't feel pressure from us that you have to be on the call doing it every single week. Take as many weeks off as you need. Because of that though, folks who come once a month, twice a month, are missing a lot of our discussions.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: So we thought we could do a fun little recap video and we could just share it with the Harbor folks. And the ones who take that healing freedom to not come on a Thursday can still know what the conversation was about. I'm just doing this on my laptop. I don't even want to say this in front of your tech team How, how I'm embarrassed by how, how low tech this is. But I just do a little quick chop edit inside YouTube. Then they have to compress for nine hours and then, like, it goes on our YouTube channel. And uh, I guess it would be really cool if in at some

future day we could pull off, like, audio content, video content, without paying tons of money to an expert, without having to spend hours and hours and hours and hours trying to learn the expertise ourselves. That's a wishlist of like an impossible dream. But that's what comes to mind. It would be cool to be able to have different forms of content for people inside Harbor and for people outside Harbor.

Sara: Yeah. I think you've scaled very elegantly from the beginning where I remember you were in Pittsburgh at the time and obviously seeing like a different visual space behind you in Zoom. Like you're physically located in a different place, but you've added things very intentionally as a community and with great purpose. And I wonder if you link that in any way what it's like to have co-pastor colleagues now, which has not always been the case at Harbor. It was you for at least a year, right?

Jon: Yeah.

Sara: But you have colleagues who are in co-ministry with you to deliberate with, and to reflect with.

Jon: Having two colleagues instead of zero colleagues has been – obviously, that's a big difference. But it's been an amazing game changer.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: I spoke at length about our transition to the Circle platform. That was all Dawn, one of my two co-pastors. She researched it, she looked at different options, she priced them out, she looked at the features, talked to some of the sales folks of the different teams. She just spearheaded that and we landed on circle. And so yeah, I mean, the scaling to the extent that we have scaled, the quality of that scaling has been a direct result of having colleagues now who are amazing, brilliant colleagues.

Sara: Hmm.

Jon: And I'll just say, you know, for those out there, I've connected with a few people doing similar work. I met a guy in the Methodist Church who's doing a video game church.

Sara: Oh.

Jon: And he just hired his first, like, ministry intern. I just spoke with a PC(USA) woman out in Denver who has sort of changed a TikTok, a viral TikTok account into a new worshipping community. And she, like, dreams of hiring folks to be able to work with her. And I'm always telling these people when I talk to them, like, if you can get a team, make a team. Like it just,

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: Harbor is so energizing to me...

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: ...that it kind of covered over some of the loneliness and some of the weariness of like doing a big undertaking alone.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: And I wasn't alone. I had amazing volunteers but you know, alone as the pastor or the paid staff and it's been great. It's been salvific having Dottie and Dawn on the team.

Sara: Wow. Okay. I wanted to invite you on a thought experiment with me about the early church.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Sara: Would you like to go on that thought experiment journey with me?

Jon: I love a good thought experiment. Okay.

Sara: <laugh> I thought you might. Okay. So I'm thinking about our context, 2023, and we have like a broad continuum of technology, you know, from like we only meet in person and our technology is the oven that bakes our bread; to like virtual reality church or like, you know, something I'm not even aware of, probably, that exists that can bring people together around mobilizing for Jesus' ministry in the world as his church. And we could name things along that continuum. And I suspect that Harbor Online is, like, not at either end of the continuum, but somewhere in the middle.

Jon: Mm-hmm.

Sara: The thought experiment I wanna go on is, like, the early church: when we think about, and we have these records or at least traditions of what the early church was grappling with. And I'm wondering if you imagine certain things like what people were wrestling with...I mean certainly doctrinally all the time of, like, what did Jesus mean when he said this? Or like, what does it mean that we welcome people into this work who don't have our same tradition? Does anything come to mind when you think about that time period in the church's very early history that you could imagine believers wrestling with of, like, is this for us or is this something maybe the early adopters who are like, this is great, we can do this now. Like, when you imagine the early church, what kind of technology are you aware of that they were wrestling with? What to adopt, what not to adopt, and how that began to play out? What kind of conversations were happening at the time?

Jon: So I don't know a ton about the early church. I maybe should learn more about early church history, but I've heard many, many, many teachings about the early church. And in some of them, I feel like, based on the agenda of the teacher, right? In some of them, the early church are these masters of innovation. They're business strategies are unparalleled. And they launch this religion that changed the world, right?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: And then in other teachings, they're just these hapless, like, they have no technology to speak of. They're courageous, but that's all they have is courage.

Sara: Hmm.

Jon: And it's the truth and the genius of Jesus's message and the message about Jesus that is what causes this movement to be sustained and to grow despite the lack of cutting edge innovation from the disciples. So I don't know what rendition is true. When I think about innovation technology in the early church, I guess what most comes to mind to me is Paul, in this missionary campaigns sustained by letter writing.

Sara: Hmm.

Jon: There were many sects in Judaism in the first century, I think. And this Jesus-following one was just one of them.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: I think Paul and the other apostles, many other apostles, going out as evangelists, as missionaries forming communities, then leaving; ut continuing to write letters back and forth with these communities. I don't know if other groups were doing that. I mean, again, I don't know first century history very well.

Sara: Yeah.

Jon: But I think that decision may have been crucial, I don't know, to the growth of the early years of this religion, as it was just part of Judaism and at some point splintered. And then, and then many, as you mentioned, many, many doctrinal innovations and questions and deliberations at the time as well.

Sara: Yeah. Well thank you for that. Yeah. It's fascinating to think about if someone is intrigued by this conversation or discomfited by this conversation, is there an invitation that you would like to invite them to?

Jon: Yes. Every invitation that I can extend, I will just throw out right now in this interview. I, I, people can check out Harbor. You can go to our website. There's a tab that says get involved and

you can sign up for just a one-on-one Zoom call with me or one of the two co-pastors. We'd love to talk about – whether it's the spiritual journey and how Harbor's kind of engagement with evangelicalism maybe is fruitful to talk about; or the technology aspect and the, the idea of online church. That's one way. On that website, you can also sign up for the link to come join us on a Thursday night. If you wanna play the role of a listener as a first-time guest on Harbor's call, those would be two invitations I would love to extend.

Sara: Awesome. And thanks for reminding me about one of the coolest things you all do, which is, like, when people click and they want that one-on-one time, you're, like, inviting them into a particular kind of conversation. And I don't think it's probably like, can we talk about the color of the pews? It's like something about, it's an important conversation for them and I'm thankful.

Jon: Thank you. Yeah. I don't think I realized it's one of those things you learn as you go. Right? I was just like, I like talking to people. Let's have a Zoom call.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jon: And I don't know what I thought it might be, but yeah, it's very often people unpacking some of their religious trauma, their church trauma maybe for the first time. And it's a privilege, it's an honor to be able to be present with them as they articulate some of that. And uh, just offer a gracious, compassionate presence is really all I can do sometimes. But, uh, thanks for saying that.

Sara: Yeah. It's a precious thing. And thank you for this conversation, Jon. It's always so fun to imagine, to converse together, and just to think about how what you are doing is really flinging wide open the doors of possibilities for Christian community.

Jon: Hmm. Thanks Sara.