



## Episode 1: Introduction

### Official Transcript

**Aren** If you could say anything to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, what would you say?

**Sebastian** Okay, so. This is—uhh. Yeah. Okay. [CLEARS THROAT] Dear Church...

. . .

[CROWD TALKING]

**Aren** It's a chilly fall evening in Southern California, and I'm standing outside holding a brand-new microphone. Also, I'm at church. All around me are adults who range from about 18 to their mid-30s. There's lots of them.

**Aren** So, we're here. I see a lot of young adults mingling, eating something that I think is nachos, drinking lattes. They seem to be having a good time. And my plan is to interrupt that.

**Aren** What's brought them together is one of the largest gatherings of Seventh-day Adventist young adults on the West Coast. They just finished worship, which featured power chords, fog machines, and a preacher who spoke about the power of effective communication. She began her message saying that we as people judge whether we like somebody in the first ten

seconds we meet them, so it's important to make good first impressions. I'm afraid she might be right.

**Aren** Alright, who should I talk with first? I kind of feel like the teacher that everybody wants to avoid eye contact with. Maybe I'll head towards the nachos.

**Aren** This group has been on my mind a lot lately. I've been a young adult pastor for 12 years, and now serve as my conference's youth & young adult director. I love working with young people and partnering with them to shape the direction of our church because I know we're only as strong as our next generation.

But that's the problem. As you may know, American Christianity is shrinking, especially among our youngest members. Pew Research tells us that just half of young adults today identify as Christian, and two-thirds leave the church by age 22. That goes for Adventism as well.

And just in case you aren't familiar with the Seventh-day Adventist church or its history, here's a brief summary:

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, a man in upstate New York named William Miller believed he knew the year Jesus was returning to earth. He gathered a large amount of followers, called Millerites, who all believed Jesus was returning in October of 1844. He didn't, obviously, and the day became known as The Great Disappointment.

But from that group emerged a new church, led by husband and wife James and Ellen White. They still believed in Jesus' eventual return, or "Advent," they just didn't claim to know when. They also established other beliefs: They viewed death as a sleep, so no Hell, there was a unique emphasis on health and diet, and they adhered to the original seventh-day Sabbath, meaning every sundown Friday to sundown Saturday would be considered holy. Also, Ellen White was not only the church's matriarch, she was its prophet too. Her visions and writings guided the denomination's development for its first 50 years—and in many ways, they still do.

It's now been over 160 years since the church was born, growing to over 20 million members worldwide. It owns schools, universities, hospitals—and, yet, here in its country of origin, it's dwindling. In fact, just 6% of the Church today is in North America.

In response, church leadership has said they want to give our young adults a seat at the table and hear what they have to say. Which is great, and I commend our leadership for doing that. But sometimes, an invitation to speak doesn't equate to a promise to listen. And so I thought I could help in that process.

That's why I'm holding the microphone.

**Aren** Okay, let's try these nice people over here. Hi, how are you? My name is Aren and I'm asking young adults questions about the church. Is it okay if I ask you a couple quick questions?

**Woman 1:** Okay.

**Aren** Yeah? And you're both SDA? Okay, so first question: What is your favorite thing about being Seventh-day Adventist?

**Woman 1** My favorite thing about being Seventh-day Adventist is the community and lifelong friendships I've made out of this community.

**Woman 2** Yeah, that was actually, the first thing that popped into my mind is also community. But the fact that we could grow together as a family through, you know, tough times but also the joyous times.

**Aren** I hear a lot of answers like this.

**Man 1** Just one favorite thing? There's so many great things. Wow. My absolute favorite thing is the importance placed on community.

**Man 2** Community.

**Woman 3** The biggest thing for me has been, like, community.

**Woman 4** I think the community as well.

**Woman 5** My favorite thing about being Seventh-day Adventist is probably the community aspect. We're at a young adult conference and the speaker was talking about how so many people do life alone, and I just remember feeling that's not something I've ever experienced.

**Woman 6** It feels like home, you know, wherever you are. I'm from Peru came to the United States and I know I could go to Europe or anywhere and I'll find my family because I'm part of the SDA community.

**Aren** What is your favorite thing about being Seventh-day Adventist?

**Man 3** Haystacks. Like, haystacks are so delicious.

**Man 4** I think my favorite part is the day of rest. Having—taking time out of a busy work week and school just to really kind of reconnect with God and rejuvenate.

**Man 5** Honestly, my favorite part about Adventism is the idea of, like, our theology and how there's this idea of like present truth.

**Man 6** I love that I'm Adventist because it's a very unique cult and we love to do life together. But because of that cult we all find Jesus.

**Woman 7** There's many worse things about being an Adventist, but I guess I'll tell you the best thing. I would say some of the stuff that I've learned from Adventism is a little bogus to me, but then when you actually dig deep into Scripture and you

understand the meaning behind the interpretations that Adventism has brought to light, I think that's when I'm like, oh that's exciting, that's so cool.

**Woman 8** Yeah, I would just say the Adventist culture. Just today I met a bunch of people that are mutual friends of another friend, so it's just like we all know each other kind of thing, and we all know what haystacks are, we all know what Pathfinders are, we all know the thirteen Adventist universities here. I just, I love the culture and how it brings us all together, it really builds community.

**Aren** Apparently, finding a favorite part of Adventism is not a difficult question. Some talk for so long I have to cut them off. I'm finding this part to be easy. Even fun.

Of course, I'm not the first person to survey young Adventists about their views towards the Church. Perhaps the most famous study was called "Valuegenesis," first conducted in 1990, where questionnaires were given to over 15,000 Adventist teenagers across North America. Among other things, the results exposed the repercussions of elevating behavior standards as the test of orthodoxy; for example, they found most teens feared the Second Coming because their lack of perfect behavior left them assuming they weren't good enough for salvation.

The study was again conducted in 2000 and for a third time in 2010. Across those 20 years, youth saw an increase in faith maturity, but a decrease in doctrinal acceptance and adherence to defining behaviors, like not dancing and not wearing jewelry.

In 2013, the Church commissioned Barna Group to conduct a nationwide survey of 18–29-year-old Adventists, with close to 500 responding. The research showed that only half of Adventist young adults were attending church weekly, though many said they were open to one day returning. In their summary, Barna wrote that the Church's decision between judgment or acceptance of young adults is critical, the "hinge by which most in that age group will ultimately define their Adventist experience."

It's now been over a decade since that study was completed. I can't say for sure what the Church sees as the lasting result of the Barna and Valuegenesis research. Certainly, there

have been new initiatives in youth and young adult ministry at each level, so it's not to say there haven't been changes—but it's fair to wonder just how different the results of the next study will look.

Personally, I can say that the majority of the young adults I've encountered have a deep love for Adventism. But I can also say that the distance between the values of the young people I've worked with, and the Church I've been working for, have grown wider apart. That's probably what motivated me to start asking them about it.

But I had to make sure it wasn't just me.

[PHONE RING]

**Dr. Martin** Hello?

**Aren** Hi, Doctor Martin. How are you doing?

**Dr. Martin** I'm fine, Aren. How are you doing?

**Aren** And so I gave a call to Dr. Allan Martin. Dr. Martin is an Adventist pastor in Texas who also leads the North American Division's Young Adult LIFE Initiative. He's been at the forefront of advocating for young adult involvement in the church for years.

**Aren** I want to start in 2022, which is when you gave a message at the Called Convention, which was a convention for thousands of Adventist pastors. Can you just share what message you were hoping to get across to the church that day?

**Dr. Martin** Yeah, I appreciate you remember something back from 2022, seems like an eon ago. My main point, if I was to try and summarize what my main point was, is that although it is a wonderful thing in our church to have so many various programs for youth ministry, we have very, very strong colleges and universities that serve our collegiate students. We for some time now, over a half century, have seen our young

adults, as one researcher says, “put their faith on the shelf,” which basically means that they may not leave a relationship with Jesus, but the role of our local church is kind of put on the shelf as they move on to other aspects of their lives. And so, I reported over 10 million young adults had left the church during that important phase since 1965.

And so, my plea or my request of the pastors, is for us to make endeavors for our churches to be rich soil, a place where young adults can get a sense of purpose and identity and belonging. If we aren’t intentional, we’ll miss the opportunity of capturing the vision, the imagination, and the hopes of next generations.

**Aren** So then what is it that you think our young adults are looking for from the Church? Is it just a matter of programming or is there also a deeper disconnect that’s leaving many of them feeling like the Church is no longer an essential in their life?

**Dr. Martin** You know, I’m not so much concerned about creating more programming for young adults. It’s not maybe so much that there isn’t programming, but if our presupposition is, is that, well, as long as they’re with their parents, they’ll go to youth group, what is our plan for them in those young adult years, those transitional years, what Dr. Meg Jay calls “The Deciding Decade,” the 20-something years—what is our plan for them to be involved or to be encouraged or inspired by our local church?

This generation may or may not have children for quite some time. They may or may not decide to move on to that next phase of life. In fact, some of them, because of the necessity of their career, will be in school two or three times longer than their predecessors. So graduate school and doctoral degrees and additional professional development is necessary for them to get into their career. And most of our local churches aren’t as well equipped for this interesting stage of the 18-to-29-year-old era that is filled with all kinds of crossroads and important decisions, and so oftentimes faith in the context of church attendance will fade and become a less of a priority in the midst of all the decisions and transitions they’re navigating.

**Aren** Dr. Martin, you served as the lead research facilitator for the “Adventist Millennial Study” with Barna, a study that I thought revealed some pretty interesting data about the relationship between our church and young adults. It’s been several years now since that study, but I’m curious what you see as the value of that study and what are the takeaways you gained from it?

**Dr. Martin** Yeah, well, thank you for that, Aren. You're very kind and I appreciate you pointing back to some of the research that we've done and the partners that we've had in the past. We were on the bridge of David Kinnaman and the Barna Group’s release of their book *You Lost Me* where they identified a variety of places where, yeah, there was a disconnect between the Church and young adults, and so the North American Division wanted to have a little bit better microscope of how the Adventist young adults specifically were experiencing the Church. And, you know, the summary finding of our specific partnership with Barna to do the same replication of that study but with Adventist young adults was that actually compared to the general population of young adults in the Christian Church, unfortunately for the Adventist Church, there was more of a gap. There was a more significant breach in regards to the connectedness between our church and young adults.

And so, in our talking with Barna and part of the research there is just finding a more intentional approach—and this may seem rather simplistic, but finding intentional approaches of sharing our stories. Finding ways, as you mentioned earlier, of building relationships. One of the things that we found very fascinating in the Barna study is in the qualitative data. That means the interviews that they did with dozens upon dozens of Adventist young adults. They actually craved relationships with older generations, and to foster communication and to glean from the wisdom of older generations, and that's been a kind of been a tantamount milestone focus of our work with Growing Together now as we've partnered with Fuller Youth Institute.

**Aren** How did you become such an advocate for young adults in the Adventist Church?



**Dr. Martin** Wow, man. This is—this is going beyond the data now and going for the personal story, huh?

**Aren** [LAUGHS]

**Dr. Martin** Well, you know it's an interesting thing. I had the fortunate experience in my local church as a young man to be in a small church, which actually I would say in many ways the small churches have an advantage over the larger churches. But in my small local church, they encouraged the involvement of young people and I was involved very early on as a youth elder and I enjoyed the engagement with older generations as I was growing up.

Well, as I moved into my graduate studies at Fuller and was there, I began to realize, as I had my daughter, that if we did not begin to do something more purposeful in regards to the relationship of young people to the Church, based on the statistics at that time in my life, I could flip a coin and could easily decide with a flip of a coin the 50/50 chance that my own daughter has, at that time she was a baby, but as she becomes a young adult it could very well be that I could flip that coin and 50/50 chance that she could potentially drop from involvement with the Church that I had given my life to and dedicated my professional life to. And that was not a satisfactory outcome, at least in my mind, in regards to the future of my daughter.

**Aren** How old is your daughter now?

**Dr. Martin** She's in her mid-20s and she's in the full sway of married life. She recently got married last year. I'm delighted to say that as a result of her faith journey and the faithfulness of her new husband, they're pursuing being a part of an Adventist church. In fact, they're finding a smaller Adventist church, so yeah, I'm happy to say that.

Now the part I would add to that that caveat is that my fervor for young adults continues because, you know, Aren, the problem is you blink and next thing you'll know, I'm going to have a grandchild. And my desire for that grandchild would be the same. And I would be just as impassioned to make sure that our local churches are ones where my grandchild, as well as my daughter and her husband, can thrive.

**Aren** As we wrap things up, what do you think is the most important thing for our church to understand about our young adults today?

**Dr. Martin** Well, I mean, I think this transcends just simply this generation of young adults. I do think that this is some principle that needs to be applied across the broadband here. I think we need to give a serious, serious scrutiny as church leaders, what is our leadership onramp to give next generations an opportunity to be vibrantly involved with the vision and the hopes of our denomination? That will keep us growing young, if we had that mindset. How are we planning for the Joshuas when our time of leadership as Moses is coming to an end? I don't think we have that clarified in our mind. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that everyone has to be employed by the Church, but how are we pouring into that next generation those leadership opportunities?

And the second thing I would say, Aren, and thank you so very much for having conversation with me on this, is there has to be an intentionality of us beginning to look at the next generations that are coming up behind us and to foster authentic relationships. Now, some of those relationships will be mentoring relationships. Some of those relationships will be geared towards looking at their vocation or what they want to do with their lives. And that's all wonderful.

But what if, what if we decided, as opposed to going to the friends that we've hung out with for decades and enjoying the sweet fellowship that we have in our local church, what if we made it a point to build relationships with the generations that came behind us, not only for the sake and the benefit of mentoring them, but also so that they can mentor us? They understand far more about the society that we live in

because they are the digital generation. And they also know the realities of how anxiety and depression are impacting more and more of our people and more of more of the people in the world, just because of the accessibility we have to the ways by which the world is going sideways. We need to start thinking, especially at the local church, what are the ways by which we can start growing together instead of growing apart?

**Aren** I lied. I have one more question for you.

**Dr. Martin** Sure.

**Aren** What is your favorite thing about being Seventh-day Adventist?

**Dr. Martin** Well, you know the part that I love about being a Seventh-day Adventist. Seventh-day Adventists have a brilliant, pristine, in fact elegant theology. And for me as a kind of an analytical fella, a person that likes structure, I love a theology that holds well together. But our senior pastor cautioned us. He cautioned us: If you have the Adventist theology and you do not have Jesus Christ at the center of that theology, then Adventist theology is a horrific way to live. In my mind it could very well be kind of sadomasochistic, if you would, in regards to religiosity.

And so the part that I love about the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in its best, you know—and we're all human—in its the best version is that it points to a Jesus that we've fallen in love with. And in any, in any melodrama, in the classic novels and stories of all ages, there's nothing better than a hero that saves the day. And I believe that the Seventh-day Adventist Church believes in that hero, that hero being Jesus Christ, and his soon returned to make all things right.

**Aren** I appreciate the answer. I thought you were going to say haystacks.

**Dr. Martin** Hey, you know what? I won't, I won't turn away a haystack. And just for your listeners, if this makes it past the editing floor, the secret to a good haystack is rice and Catalina dressing.

**Aren** I think you just committed blasphemy.

**Dr. Martin** [LAUGHS] Well hey, listen, I was in Australia and they were putting radishes and pineapple on the haystack, so I believe you have a lot of creative license.

**Aren** Dr. Martin, thank you so much for taking some time and speaking with me.

**Dr. Martin** My delight, Aren, blessings to you and thanks for having me on.

**Aren** Thank you so much to Dr. Allan Martin, and his team with the Young Adult LIFE Initiative. You can find a link to it in our show notes.

There were several things Dr. Martin said that stuck with me afterwards. The fact that research has shown Adventism has a worse generational gap than others, is striking—as is the figure of 10 million young adults leaving the church since 1965. I also heard him propose two solutions, and this is a broad summation, but first, for the church at its various levels to develop onramps for young adult involvement and leadership. And second, for older generations to be proactive in building relationships with the young adults in their reach, which is actually something young adults also are looking for.

This aligns with what I was hearing from the young adults too. Their favorite thing about Adventism was overwhelmingly the community it offers them. And none of them said, "With just with my peers."

In fact, we've even gone younger and found similar results. We conducted a separate survey of academy juniors and seniors about their favorite thing about being Adventist. Some of them said things like leadership opportunities, the knowledge of God's presence—one kid just wrote, "Sabbath Vibe." But 3 out of 4 gave the same answer: "The community"— their

church, their school, being welcomed in by a group of caring people. That's what Adventism means to them.

Which brings us back to that conference and my new microphone. I had gotten my answer to the first question. Now I had to get my answer to the second.

**Aren** Okay, next question: If you could say anything to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, what would you say?

**Woman 1** That's an odd question.

**Woman 2** Oh my gosh, I don't know.

**Woman 1** I think if I could say anything to the Adventist Church I would say to really be genuine in our showing of love of Christ and compassion towards others.

**Aren** What would you want to say?

**Man 1** I would say be willing to listen and change.

**Woman 7** I would say you guys need to chill. Just kidding. [LAUGHS] Relax.

**Man 6** We have to continue the message that we love people. Not compromising on that love being spread to any group of people. We need to continue to affirm people who we may not, I don't know, completely agree with.

**Woman 2** You know, the Bible says that towards the end of time that the love of many will wax cold and I think that's something that I definitely have seen a lot of in the last few years.

**Aren** What would you say to the Church?

**Woman 8** Wake up. It's time to do something, it's time to make change. You're losing people very, very fast, and we have a unique message that no one else has, I believe. And so we have this advantage, so why not use it for good?

**Woman 2** Whether it's Adventists or not, I believe that we should be showing that kind of love that Christ has shown us to other people because there's no better time than now than it is to show that love to the world.

**Aren:** Okay, next question: If you could say anything to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, what would you say?

**Man 3** That's a hard one.

**Man 7** Understand that every human matters.

**Woman 4** I get that.

**Aren** Did you want to say more or just leave it at that?

**Man 7** I'll leave it at that.

**Woman 9** I would say that, listen to the people who aren't necessarily in positions of leadership. Their voices need to be heard as well. The people who aren't being flown out to GC, like, their voices matter too. And I think that when we're making the decisions at the higher ups we need to be thinking about the people who are actually doing the work and keep them into consideration. That's what I would say.

**Man 4** I think I would say to be more inclusive. I think our Adventist culture can be so unique that we only want to attract other Adventists, and we don't do a good enough job attracting people outside of this unique culture.

**Woman 6** Don't be afraid to talk about things that are uncomfortable. Just bring things up because it's like the elephant in the room, so you not talking about it doesn't mean they don't exist.

**Woman 7** Adventists have a beautiful message and a good, good heart. But so much of Adventism has taught me to really put first things that don't matter about my salvation, and yet they emphasize so much on it that when I do make a mistake or if I do mess up, I feel ashamed or I feel nervous to share it with anyone.

You know, I was saying, like, you need to relax, but really I think so much of it is to show grace, to show mercy, and to show understanding because once you build a relationship with people, it's almost hard to judge them.

**Aren** Wow, thank you.

Alright, thank you guys.

Good answer. Thank you.

Thank you so much for your time.

**Aren** By the end of the night, I've got a lot of thoughts rushing through my head. First, it felt evident to me that this was not the first time most of them thought about these questions. Clearly, they both love the Church, and they have something to say to it.

But second, I couldn't help but feel like I didn't get the whole story. Each person I spoke with was sharing out of their own personal experience, and I wanted to know about those too. I mean, what led them to say what they did? Why was that the message they wanted to give to us?

As I walked back to my car, I was confronted with the question: Could I really say I'm listening to what our young adults are telling us, without taking the time to get to know who they are? I expected to leave that evening with some answers. Instead, I left ready to ask

a lot more questions. From SECC Youth and the Southeastern California Conference, I'm Aren Rennacker, and this is *Dear Church*.

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**Aren** So, here's what you can expect from this podcast series. Each of the next eight weeks, we are going to be releasing new episodes featuring the first-hand story of a young adult guest. Those stories will be told by the young adults themselves, with some help from me and our production team. And while it's an impossible task to choose a perfect cross-section of young adult representation, we're going to try our best to feature a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, with special emphasis on hearing lesser told stories, if possible. Though, again, we know we unfortunately won't get everybody.

Following each person's story, we're going to conclude the episode by hearing them read a handwritten letter to the Church. As much as I loved hearing the spontaneous answers from the young adults, I think it's equally special to hear their reflective and measured words as well. Especially after we've learned more about who they are and the experiences that shape them.

And a quick note on some of the themes you'll hear come up in this show. If we are going to remain true to our purpose of allowing our Church's young adults to share their stories, that means we're going to hear topics discussed in ways that may be different than how you view them, or how I view them. At least, I hope. It would be surprising and maybe unfortunate if not.

Oh, and even though *Dear Church* is made with Seventh-day Adventist listeners in mind, we know much of what's shared may resonate with those beyond Adventism, or those less familiar with the Church. We welcome every listener and apologize in advance for any insider language you may hear. We'll do our best to provide explanation when necessary.

We will end the season with a final episode that won't feature one guest's story. It will be a little different, that's all I'll say on that for now. Whether this show concludes after one



season or not is something I can't share at this point—because I genuinely don't know.

Frankly, if we can even make it all the way through one season, I'll be thrilled. A big ovation to all of you podcasters creating regular content, especially in the Adventist space. I know it's hard work, but you are helping our Church grow stronger and healthier through that work.

And an even deeper appreciation to all of you listening. We realize it is a monumental ask to invite you to give of your time and listen to this project. Our hope is that you will not only make that commitment out of your own love and appreciation for today's young people, but also because you find the show helps you think and grow in your own faith journey as well. We could think of no greater honor than that.

And so, whether you are young or old, Adventist or not, Christian or not, whoever you may be, truly, thank you for listening, and we hope you join us next week for Episode 2. We'll see you then.

**Aren** Okay, next question. If you could say anything to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, what would you say?

**Woman 9** I guess I would basically say the same thing. To just have, just a time to give the young adults and the young people more of a chance to speak and, yeah, to hear us out. So, yeah!

. . . .

**Aren** *Dear Church* is a production of SECC Youth and the Southeastern California Conference. It is engineered by JO Cordero and hosted and edited by me, Aren Rennacker. Music courtesy of Blue Dot Sessions. Cover art by Taji Saleem.

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