



Episode 5: Ezrica

Official Transcript

Aren If you could describe yourself in three words, which words would you choose?

Ezrica I think I would describe myself as an advocate. So, I like really value fighting for people. I would describe myself as a seer. Like as I walk through life, I really find value in not just like looking at people, but really seeing them. So, an advocate, a seer, and I think to that is like an empowerer. Like, one of my favorite things to do in public is compliment women. Just, I don't know them, I just walk to them like, "You are stunning." Sometimes I'm like, was that weird? Was that awkward? But then I think about, you know how maybe they were going through a really rough time in life. And I've had seasons in my life where I pray that someone would just see me and say something kind, even if it wasn't relevant to what I was going through. Because their act of kindness or their word of kindness would remind me that it's going to be okay. So I've kind of committed to be that person.

Aren Welcome to another episode of *Dear Church*, where we hear the stories of Seventh-day Adventist young adults and get to listen as they share a message written to all of us.

Today, on *Dear Church*, we meet Ezrica. And there are lots of things that make Ezrica's story worth hearing. She was born in Jamaica and then immigrated with her family to New York when she was five years old. She has lived and traveled across the US, from the east coast to the west coast to the south. And she's been involved in many different fields of work, some

just for fun, others were more serious, but I think all of them point to my favorite thing about Ezrica, and that is her ambition. She is ambitious to her core.

And perhaps that ambition was no more on display than when she served as a missionary with a volunteer relief organization for nine years, from ages 17 to 26. Not in a faraway country, but right here. In America. And from that experience, and what she experienced in the years before and after, Ezrica discovered so much more about the person she is and the church she loves. Here's her story.

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Ezrica Oh, those were fun years. So, I left home at 17 and I didn't see my family for a long time, like consistently, because I was always on the road doing mission work. I also did mission work every spring break, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Absolutely fun, absolutely difficult. Imagine being with the same, like, 15 people. We're eating like oatmeal, rice, and beans every day. Showering when it was available. I'm sleeping on floors—

Aren So what was the mission work and where did you go?

Ezrica Yeah. So, the mission work, we did a lot of things. So, one of the things we did, we did children's ministry. So we'd go to like low income communities in Alabama and teach like Bible studies, but in a creative, fun way. We would also do feeding programs, so we would bring food to the low income communities and we did medical relief, so we would take healthcare to lower income communities. But we also did things like anti-AIDS, anti-violence marches.

We were in Florida when Sandy Hook happened. And we were just like, there's no way we can't go up there. We have to do something. So we drove from Florida to Connecticut. And one of the roles I played in the organization was spokesperson, so I would speak to the media. And I'm still young, I think I'm still within my teens at this point. And as a result of that I was interviewed on CNN. The person I think that

did the technical interview was Poppy Harlow and then Anderson Cooper ran it. And so we're just meeting different people from CNN, we're going to funerals, we're singing, we're hugging, we're praying. Just...

Aren Just there to provide support.

Ezrica Yeah. Provide support.

Aren Wow. How long were you involved with this?

Ezrica Nine years. From the time I was 17 to 26.

Aren Why?

Ezrica Well, you know, as an adult. I now realize that, like, the pain of childhood was so much that there was a part of me that I couldn't process it anymore. So then I just had to like kind of leave. Even though I loved my family, there was still just so much going on, you know. But with that, I was still who I was because of my parents and what they taught us, and they'd instilled strong values of like service in us. And so it felt like I found my purpose in ministry.

Aren Ezrica's father was the first to immigrate to America. He worked for the Church as a colporteur for several months before bringing over the rest of the family. You can imagine the shock they felt going from their home in the Caribbean, to upstate New York. Ezrica says she can still remember the day they landed and seeing snow for the first time.

Ezrica: Life was by no means easy. We were poor. Like, tragically poor, right. And my parents are so brilliant, and I'm not just saying that because they're my parents. I often think, you know, if we were born in America, same parents, we would be like millionaires by now because they were just so innovative in so many ways. But when you're an immigrant that innovation and that—the intellect and the drive—you're not able to use that to advance. You're just able to use that to break even.

And so for us, we came legally, we did everything correctly and the Adventist Church was filing for our family to have our green card and then my dad got in a car accident and so they stopped that process. Actually—oh, why do I want to cry? Because that's probably the single hardest thing of my life, is because we were no longer able to go to the path of like the appropriate path of permanent residency and citizenship, we then spent the rest of our lives, like, struggling to make ends meet.

I don't know if it's resentment, if I'm being honest, but there's a part of me that's like, the Church didn't have to stop filing for us. And it's not like my dad was lazy or chose to stop working. He got in an accident. And so that has altered the trajectory of my life, and I see it in real time now. And because we were so poor, we moved often. Like, I don't remember staying in a city for more than three years, and within those three years we were still bouncing from home to home.

Aren Did you know as a child that you were poor?

Ezrica You know, that is a good question. Uh, maybe? I think, yeah, I think we could understand that something wasn't normal because we were moving so often. And there were times we didn't have food or there were times I can actually remember, like, not having electricity in the middle of like a Syracuse winter. Yeah, now that you mention it, it's like all coming back because I couldn't have, like, the clothes the kids did in school and so I got made fun of, and my hair couldn't be like theirs and just a lot of—there was a lot of differences that I could notice as a child.

Aren Did any church in particular help out your family's financial situation?

Ezrica I think so. Of course, I wouldn't have known when I was younger. But I do remember when we lived in Syracuse, like, our church, owned a church building or they bought a building that they were going to convert into a community center or something like that. So it's this huge building. There was a pool. There was a gym. The pool was janky. It was not actually like a good pool. Everything about the

building was dusty, to be honest. Like, it just wasn't great. We lived there for a time. So, like, we lived in this abandoned building.

Aren What was that like?

Ezrica Fun. Because it was so big. It was like, think of like an industrial sized building and my room is huge because it's an office space. And I remember like running up and down the hall. I don't even think it had a kitchen. We didn't care. It was fun. We all had our own room for the first time, and again, it's because we're like in an industrial sized business.

Aren How many homes do you remember living in as a child?

Ezrica I want to say—oh man, that's a really good question. I've never thought about this.

Aren More than you can count?

Ezrica Maybe not more than you can—this is a good question!

Aren More than six?

Ezrica Yeah, for sure. I'm pretty sure we lived in more than six.

Aren More than 10?

Ezrica Yeah, you know that—I actually feel like that's possible.

Aren Wow.

Ezrica I feel like that's very possible.

What's funny is a lot of the difficult moments ended up being really fun because I had my siblings. And, like, our dad—I don't think he realized I was not a guy because he would make us do all the things he did. So if he was tiling, my sisters and I, we were tiling. We were grouting. We were moving wood. We did it all, right?

Singing with my family, we would go to different churches and we'd sing. My dad's a bass, my mom is an alto, my sisters are sopranos, I'm an alto-tenor. My brother is a tenor. So we would like go to churches and sing. And we're just driving, just in it together. And yeah, I can't even express how beautiful that memory is in my mind.

Another thing my parents did to make ends meet is cook. So they tried their hand at like restaurants and we would like go to general conferences and cook and sell food. So, I'm a caterer. Like, it's one of the things I do in life. I sing at church. These things are, like, they tie me to my family.

Aren It sounds like your family was—your dad especially was a fighter?

Ezrica Oh. Yeah, yeah. Like, even now my mom is in nursing school. She's 60-plus. I think the last time I went home and I looked at my mom and saw what she was doing. My dad went blind as he's on dialysis and had cancer last year. Like, resilience is interwoven in the fabric of my family. And I think that actually is the nature of—when life is not necessarily easy, when things aren't handed to you readily, you develop a strength that you only experience as a result of hardship.

Aren Do you remember as a child what you wanted to be when you grew up?

Ezrica Yeah, something in the science field. I wanted to be a neuroscientist or like a neurosurgeon. Something within like that dealt with the brain.

Aren Where did that come from?

Ezrica I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I know our parents, they really emphasized education. Like, they ingrained in us, like we don't have the privilege of not being excellent.

Aren When Ezrica was 16 her family moved from New York to Alabama. They wanted to get away from the city, and her parents had been hired to work in the cafeteria at Oakwood University. But after they arrived, the jobs fell through. Ezrica counts it as another time the church let her family down. They decided to stay and when the time came, Ezrica began looking for funding so she could enroll in college classes—which, she was able to do. One semester at a time.

Ezrica It took me eight years to graduate. Like, I can't get federal loans or anything like that, so. I would have to get sponsored, but you know what? One, I'm debt free. Two, in retrospect I have some of the greatest testimonies about like God coming through.

There was a time, I think both my sister and I needed \$13,000 to be able to go to school. And there's a window, and when that day ends you just can't register for the semester. And so there's this one time where she and I needed that money and it's like the last day—the last day, and we're gonna sit out for this semester. Mind you, I sat out quite a few times. And I don't know where this woman in the office that like worked on financial aid got \$26,000 within like—it's like the last day, the last hour. She's typing away. And she's like, “Oh, you guys are cleared, like you're good to go.” And I saw that happen so many times.

Aren This was also around the time she began volunteering with the relief organization. Some years it was while she was studying, other years she would take semesters off of school and serve full time, going across the country to different states and Adventist churches. And, I should say, the organization she worked with was not officially affiliated with the Church or the university, it was independent. But it was mostly comprised of Ezrica's fellow Adventist college students. And even though it was completely volunteer-based, nobody was getting paid, that didn't make it any less demanding.

Ezrica Every Sabbath. I'd go to, like, low-income communities and do Bible studies. Then Christmas, Thanksgiving, spring break I would be on the mission field, going to different cities. So, we're traveling Colorado, Oregon, Washington all the way down.

Aren What did you notice—I mean, visiting Adventist churches all across the country is not something most people get to do. They only know what their own Adventist church looks like. What did you notice by visiting churches all across the country?

Ezrica One thing I actually noticed about visiting Adventist churches is sometimes Adventists were not the most welcoming. Because now I have comparison to like other denominations.

Like I remember in Utah. Of all places, Utah. And I remember going to an Adventist church and, yeah, actually now this veers into like, racism and stuff. I remember going to an Adventist church, giving the pitch, like hey, can we come in? We're fundraising, we're doing this, we want to baptize this many people, so on and so forth, and they were so against it, but not in a kind way. We literally walked across the street to a Mormon church and we told them exactly the same pitch. Not only were they, like, so receptive, but that Mormon pastor, he, like, hyped us up. He was so proud of us, took out his wallet, gave us everything he had in his wallet. He's just like, "Tell me about your experience."

And I think also that experience opened my eyes to kind of how I think sometimes Adventists are elitist. We've always been taught to look at other denominations like they don't have the truth. I beg to differ because I've been to Adventist churches that treated me like I was an outcast. And I've been to Pentecostal, Baptist churches, Mormon churches, Catholic churches that treated me like I was a human. And so, when I hear terms like, "Oh, we're the remnant," I'm like define that, what does that mean? I'm not actually impressed with the language, especially when the actions don't back it up.

Aren When Ezrica made the difficult decision after nine years to step away and conclude her mission work, there were multiple reasons why. She was getting closer to graduation and hoping to turn her biology degree into a career in healthcare. That dream felt more real the day DACA passed, a 2012 federal policy that allowed the children of undocumented immigrants to receive work permits. She says she still remembers the day she heard the news—and how her eyes instantly filled with tears. She calls it a, “Thank you God for seeing me” moment.

But there were other reasons she stepped away. For all the good the relief organization had done, Ezrica could also identify deep issues—from the harsh system of discipline to the overwhelming expectations. She felt like she had to regularly choose between the mission and seeing her family. Up to that point, she almost always chose the mission.

Ezrica As beautiful as it was, like, I don't think I left on the best terms. I think I have a strong passion against spiritual abuse. And by that, I mean deep in our hearts, I think a lot of us have the inclination to serve. Like, the desire to serve is very natural. We were called to serve. It's biblical. Sometimes though leaders take that desire and like use it against you.

I think I was listening to the podcast *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* and there was an episode where they were talking about a cult and I wept. Because I was like, “Was I in a cult?” We did so much good work, so much. I am the woman I am today because I spent nine years serving. But I'm also a woman today, so I cannot ignore the blatant failings of that organization as well. Just like I don't ignore the blatant failings of my church. Like, to pretend it doesn't exist doesn't it make it go away.

Honestly, I dedicated a lot of my life to them. To the point where now with my family, like, I don't know if it's I'm making up time, but I just spent so much time on the mission field. Yeah, I dedicated my entire life to serving God. To the fullest extent.

Aren Do you regret any of that?

Ezrica I don't—No. Because I think I felt like I was going where God wanted me to go. Actually, hold on, let me think about this.

You know, I'm going to say no simply because I'm not a person that lives with regret. Like, I do think the good and the bad, not that they're necessary or like God inflicts them on us, but they are a part of the story. So, if I say that I love my story, I have to love both sides. And the good taught me lessons, but so did the bad.

Aren With both college and her time as a missionary complete, Ezrica had to decide what's next. She still wanted to serve in healthcare, but medical school wasn't yet an option. She loved writing, speaking, cooking—and then a friend suggested she move out to California to study nursing. It would be a way to both work in healthcare and save up money to eventually pursue medicine again. On top of that, moving so far away—it would feel like a fresh start.

Ezrica Had zero, like nothing, nothing to my name. And I was supposed to have housing and when I flew out here, it fell through. So when I got here, I actually was going to fake sick so that I could sleep in the ER. That's how, like, nothing I had. I don't even think my mom knows this. If she ever listens she's gonna lose her mind.
[LAUGHS]

Yeah, and then what happens? I get into school, but I can't find the funding. So, then it's like back to that situation of like, God, what? I'm now in a different state. I have no family here. I know very little, like, I don't really know anyone here. I looked forward to the weekend because it's like, oh, church community.

So, growing up, I went to predominantly black churches. For the most part I actually think we went to Caribbean churches, which makes sense. You know, we came from Jamaica so that familiarity is like necessary when you're in that big transition, but the people here were, they were very different from what I'd known growing up. Like,

one of the first people I met here, she's still one of my really good friends. She's like the first person I met, invited me to her house and never left, essentially. Like, when I moved to California, I slept in a bed more within the first six months of moving in California than the previous nine years of my life.

Never got into school or like never found the funding for it. Ended up getting a job at the School of Medicine working on their devotional book, which now that I'm like heavily into writing, like, now I'm writing for the school of religion and I'm a freelance writer and I just, I'm about to start for the North American Division, I see that God did that.

Aren You touched on this a little bit, but can you share with me, you know, what is it like to be a Jamaican immigrant in the Adventist Church? Have you experienced racism as a black woman in the Adventist Church?

Ezrica Oh yeah. Like I remember a time where I was, I went from being on the pulpit and I was announcing something for like, young adults. Like hey, we're doing a young adult potluck. And I'm here with the pastor and I'm on stage. Everyone is seeing me. And I'll say too, like I had all my makeup done, I was in a pretty dress, blah blah blah blah. And I left the stage, went home to change because I'm walking distance, came back in like a hoodie and just like tights because I'm gonna be the one serving the food. And as I walk into the church, someone was like, they're like, "What are you doing here?"

It's happening faster than I can process it but I like kind of, "Oh, I'm going to room, blah blah blah, I'm gonna serve." And as I like walk, she steps in front of me to block me. And then I'm like, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Why would this happen? So I start questioning myself, like maybe I should have kept on my church clothes because now I'm in like casual clothes, I'm in a hoodie. And I'm like, but do I look homeless? What does it matter if I look homeless? Even if I looked homeless I shouldn't have received that treatment. And it was one of the elders that was like, "This is one of our elders." So I was an elder at the time. And then the whole demeanor changed, like,

“Oh, you were just on stage announcing.” And in that moment, and I'm not even joking, something broke. Something broke within me because there was this like fear, just like I couldn't understand why I was not allowed to enter the church. Like, I'm like, what did I do wrong?

For months after that, I was worried that everyone looked at me and what they saw first was like this random black girl. I don't even know how to explain this because faith in community I think hits the deepest parts of our needs. Like we are at our core spiritual beings. And like wired to love God. When something as nefarious as like racism seeps into that, it destroys you. It destroys you in a way that I don't even think words can express.

Aren How did you feel about the response you saw from the Adventist Church in the wake of the racial tensions during the pandemic?

Ezrica I wanted to leave the Church. I wanted to leave the Church. Because I was like...why am I here? If—yeah, like, why am I here? Why am I in this community, breaking my back to work for this community and the moment I need them just to stand up for me—everyone knows you can't change the like, not you can't change the world, but like I cannot necessarily change what's going on. But I just wanted to know that my pain, even if you didn't feel it, mattered. Like by that time I dedicated almost a decade to serving. I just wanted to know that I was seen and the thing with it too is that it transferred over to God. Like, do I matter to you, God? Here I am having panic attacks because my little brother is an Uber driver in Nashville. I don't know what's going to happen. What if I get a call? What then? And it's just like why are you so silent in the face of injustice, God? So my relationship with God took a hit, my relationship to the Church took a hit.

I don't think people understand how difficult racism is in the sense that again you then live your life feeling like you have to give a reason why you exist. You don't just experience an emotion in one area of your life and it doesn't seep into all areas of your life. Because we're like a single entity, so whatever hurts here, it ends up

affecting here too. So now I found afterwards, like it took me years to realize how those racial tensions and the silence of my church had led me to become just so insecure and defensive. Like I don't know that I feel worthy of living. I don't know that I feel worthy of being seen. And then it seeps into like, if I feel less than human, and I believe Christ died for humanity, I don't feel like Christ died for me because I'm not humanity. I am less than human.

And it's not just me as a black woman. The Hispanic community, the Asian community, anyone that like is at the receiving end of any sort of racism. It really just compromises your entire infrastructure. And I don't know that it's easy to articulate, so I don't know that many people get that.

Aren I'm curious if during that time were there any moments of hope?

Ezrica Yeah. So, inasmuch as I'm saying like there are parts of me that broke, there are also parts of me that were held together by members of my community. I think that is the only way I made it through is I'd text some of my girlfriends like, hey, I'm struggling with this. Like, I could tell that they didn't love me or not love me because of my skin color. They just love me because I was me. And so I would hold on to that. I would hold on to that. And there are people that actually did want to learn. And there's things like that that's, like, there's hope. So, I would say that my immediate community or like different individuals that made it, they went out of their way just to see me. They saw me through that time.

Aren Well, let me ask your own question to you, the question you were asking yourself at that time. Why are you still here?

Ezrica Great question because I've wrestled with it for years. You know, I would say more recently I've had a renewed sense of like conviction for Adventism. And I'm here because I believe in some of the truths that are taught within this denomination, but I'm wildly in love with God. Like, that's my person. So, the mixture of like, I believe in the truths, like I believe in the Sabbath, I believe in some of, like, the other

doctrines, and then me and Jesus, that's my best friend. I want to be that safe space so people can have access to Christ. Like, I'll take the hit if I have to. I just need you to know that Jesus is the solution. And so I think that's why I'm here, because I think Christ is worth fighting for and I think people are worth fighting for too.

Yeah, because I really, for years I was like, "I don't know about this Adventism thing." But I do know about Christ.

Aren I have an important question for you: Does California have good Caribbean food?

Ezrica Negative.

Aren You said that was such emphasis.

Ezrica Yes, because like, I mean, there's this one place in LA that I went to that was decent, but it doesn't compare to like the East Coast. Out here? Strong negative.

Aren [LAUGHS] Strong negative.

Ezrica Luckily I cook though, so...

Aren That's true. You are the good Caribbean food in California.

Ezrica Yes. And when I go home, my dad.

Aren Pre-Med. Missionary. Been a chaplain. You're a caterer. You're a singer. A worship leader. You're a writer. You're a journalist. Apparently, a podcaster it sounds like. You're a teacher. You're an advocate. How do you define yourself, Ezrica? That's a long resume.

Ezrica Honestly, I just want to be someone that points people to Christ. Like, life is hard and brokenness is all around us, and I've experienced it. Maybe all of these, like, the different pain I've gone through, like allows me to see that in others, allows me to see it in the world. And I know that Jesus—like, an authentic relationship with Jesus, not the Church, not with religion. But, like, Christ the person can help life feel like it's worth living. Like, I want to be defined as a woman who radically pushes people towards their Savior.

I love being called a “dreamer” because it pertains to my legal status, but it also pertains to me. That I get to continue dreaming even in the face of oppression, that's me. That I get to continue dreaming even in the face of closed doors, that's me. And more importantly, that I get to help others dream, that's me.

So, being a dreamer, it's tough because again, I still can't get, like, funding. This is why I haven't gone through and—I want to get my PhD. Now I want to be a professor of like some religion, something to that aspect, but I can't, not yet. But I do get to dream. And I also get to believe that God will fulfill that dream in His time.

Aren Maybe we can add a fourth word.

Ezrica Yeah...

Aren Advocate. Seer. Empowerer. And Dreamer.

Ezrica Yeah, I love that, actually. A lot.

Aren Can we hear your letter to the Church?

Ezrica Yes. Bear in mind that I'm an advocate, so I stand kind of like in front of the people that I feel like the Church has hurt and this is my letter with like those people standing behind me.

Dear Church,

We are not home yet. And as such, there is still work to do. But this work will go unnoticed and even intentionally ignored if we keep acting as if we, as a church, have attained perfection.

I've always found it strange that we ascribed such self-aggrandizing titles to our denomination as "The Remnant." I feel like that term was used to pedestalize ourselves and serve as plausible grounds for us to isolate ourselves because we are "different" from the world. We use language like we have "the truth" as if the truth is something we can contain, or the truth, who is Christ, was not given to all men when he died on the cross.

What's most devastating to me is that because of the way we regard ourselves, we as a denomination seem to have a palpable aversion to growth. We too often treat our doctrines and beliefs as sculptures, inanimate and unmovable. We should see them as a garden that can flourish and thrive. A sculpture can be observed in the present and remind the observer of the past, a time that no longer exists. But a garden is watered in the present and offers sustenance, respite, and life for the future. We as a Church should be a garden and allow ourselves to grow, to be pruned, to go through seasons of progression and change, not collect dust.

Christ did not shy away from the issues of the people. He lent his voice to matters of justice, equality, and inclusivity. He fought for those on the fringes, and in fact, most significantly, He became one of those on the fringe.

Dear Church, we were never meant to be so protective of the truth we hid ourselves. The God who defeated death and the grave is more than capable of keeping the truth alive. We were never meant to be gatekeepers of the truth, saying that only those who come within the gate can have access. We are called to be sharers of the truth and gospel proclaimers. We were meant to show the world how God's message is still relevant in times of crisis, in times of pain, in times of injustice, in times of war, and His love is sufficient. And we as a Church can only do that if we remain open to

growing and changing in a way that enables us to meet the concerns and the needs of the world around us.

Sincerely,

An advocate for change, Ezrica Bennett

Aren Ezrica, thank you for sharing with us today.

Ezrica Absolutely. Thank you so very much for having me.

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. Our music is provided by Blue Dot Sessions. Cover art by Taji Saleem. Thanks also to LLUC Media, especially Pastor Stew and Zach, for generously offering us their recording space. We really appreciate it.

Special thanks to our guest today, Ezrica Bennett. Ezrica continues to write, sing, speak, cater—and she recently produced a ten-part online series on how to engage young adults in your church. You can find the link to it in our show notes. Ezrica has also now been hired by the North American Division to develop an e-course on diversity.

This marks episode five of this series, which means we've reached the halfway point. If you'd like to listen to past episodes or learn more, please visit our website, seccyouth.com/DearChurch. Thanks so much to all of you for listening, we would love to see you here again next week for a new episode of *Dear Church*.