



Episode 2: Kelly

Official Transcript

Aren Welcome back and thanks for listening to *Dear Church*, a production of SECC Youth, where we hear both the stories and voices of young adults in the Seventh-day Adventist community. I'm your host, Aren Rennacker.

So, I'm not sure if you listened to our first episode, but it began with me going up to strangers at an Adventist young adult conference and asking them two questions: What do they like about being in the Church, and what do they want to say to the Church?

And there was this one person whose answers were especially interesting. Here's a clip from that.

Kelly I would say you guys need to chill. Just kidding! [LAUGHS] So I would say 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 So, that mysterious person's name is Kelly, and if you're like me, hearing Kelly's answers to those questions really made me want to talk to her more. So, I did. And what I heard from my second conversation with Kelly was that behind those words was the story of a young woman whose relationship with the Church goes much deeper than I could have imagined. It's a story that confronts questions about failure, belonging, and what exactly is a "calling" anyway?

It's Kelly's story, and I'm honored to share it. Enjoy.

Kelly Hi, I'm Kelly. And this is *Dear Church*.

Kelly I think it's kind of funny because in 2014 I actually considered doing ministry for like three seconds. And I think that was the year that they voted against women's ordination, was it 2014 or 2015?

Aren I think it was '15?

Kelly 2015, okay. So I remember I was like this close, and I'm showing—I know people can't see my fingers, but it's like—

Aren They're very close together.

Kelly They're very close together [LAUGHS] and I was super close to wanting to do ministry. I remember I was cycling to one of my favorite spots in Seattle on a beach. And there's this big old bus that was painted these crazy rainbow colors, and the back of it said, "The Sabbath day is the seventh day." I was like, "These people have got to be Adventist."

So I dismount off my bike and I go talk to the people and we have this amazing conversation about Adventism. It's like this older gentleman and his wife and they

live with like three small dogs in this school bus. And so, they had created this, it's like a whole house in there. And so we were just chatting about Adventism and the Sabbath and we were having a wonderful conversation. I had a great time—until the last five minutes when I said, “I think I might want to be a minister.” And immediately the mood of this person, the old man, he immediately was very cold towards me. And he was like, “You know women can't be ministers,” and I was like, “Really? Says who?” And he's like, “It says so in the Bible.” And I was like, “But if God calls you to it, how are you to say that you can determine what God has told me?” And he didn't really have an answer for that, but to me it just gave me the sense of like, whoa, is this what a lot of the world feels?

Aren Kelly Lin knows a thing or two about living in the shadows. She grew up in the Pacific Northwest, Seattle to be specific, where a sunny day can feel more like a blue moon. But even clear skies wouldn't remove her from living under the shadow of her family name. Her grandfather, David Lin, was a respected pastor in China. During the Communist Revolution, he was imprisoned for 20 years as a counterrevolutionary, making him an icon in the Chinese-Adventist community.

Man ...*Pastor David Lin with translating Ellen G. White books. In 1958, he was arrested and sent to brutal labor camps. His crime: sharing his faith.*

Kelly You know, growing up, anytime I would go to like a Chinese event with other Adventists everyone would know who my grandfather is and when you have that kind of like—it's not, it's not like being a celebrity, that's kind of weird to say, it's more of just people know who you and your family are and what they stood up for.

Man ...*who despite incredible adversity, stayed faithful to the One who is ever faithful.*

Aren So you have these grandparents with these rich stories and histories within the Church, but what about you and your immediate family, your parents growing up, what was your Adventist experience like?

Kelly That's a really good question. So, I would say my parents, my dad especially, because his grandfather was a pastor, he's a PK, it was really important for my parents to grow us up in the Church somehow. So, my siblings, my brother and sister and I, we would always go to church no matter what on Saturdays. So my mom would always say the bare minimum that you could do this week is just to go to church. You don't have to pray, you don't have to read your Bible, but you have to go to church. And so I went to church, I never skipped church. We would even show up like as the closing song is happening, we would still show up. I don't know if that was like superstition, like you have to show up in order to be holier, I don't know. [LAUGHS]

Aren She didn't say it there, but the word you'll hear Kelly use most to describe her upbringing is "sheltered." When she started high school, her Adventism led her to feeling out of place: missing Friday night events, not playing on sports teams, picking the pepperoni off her pizza. She only knew of two other Adventists on her entire campus: her brother and the school janitor. Kelly began to question: Why did she have to become an exile too?

Kelly I wanted to do all these things and I couldn't and the reason why was because "Oh, your religion says so." There wasn't really a meaning behind it that I found for me to be like, oh I'm going to give up so much of this stuff in order to follow Jesus. To me I was like, I already follow Jesus, like why do I have to not go to a football game with my friends? It didn't really make sense. So, I think growing up I kind of resented being Adventist.

Aren The resentment reached its peak when Kelly was 16. She joined the school gymnastics team, and she placed in finals. The first meet was on a Thursday, but if she won that she would be in the district finals on a Saturday. She decided she would still compete, and in the first meet she tore her ACL in her knee.

Kelly I remember thinking, "Oh, if I didn't want to go to districts and compete on Saturday then I wouldn't tear my ACL." It became this thing where it was like, "Oh, you're not being Adventist enough and so you're being punished for it." And that's when I really felt some level of like just hatred, just like so bitter that I was suffering

because what, I didn't keep the Sabbath? You know, and so many other people on my team they aren't Adventist and they don't keep the Sabbath and they're doing great, you know, so you kind of have that resentment.

Aren Once she graduated, she went to an Adventist college out of state. She says a non-SDA school wasn't really an option for her parents—not because of the Bible classes.

Kelly My mom wanted me to go to college to meet someone. She was like you're gonna go there and get married and I was like I don't think that's what college is for. And I definitely didn't do that, so—

Aren So how were you feeling about going to an Adventist college?

Kelly I was excited. Yeah, I think once the bitterness kind of went away and I realized, like, God wasn't punishing me. I think at some point the tables kind of turned and I realized that this was actually a really important Church and I really loved being a part of it. I remember thinking, like, I want to come here and learn everything I can about God. But then I was so sheltered that like I didn't know what to do with myself and so I just did everything, and I went out and I learned how to party. I was like, “This is fun.”

I think a lot of people actually can kind of relate to this but when you are really sheltered and you don't know anything else, you want to do everything that you've been told that you shouldn't be doing. So, you're like, “Oh, you should never drink, you should never try drugs.” And I'm like, “Oh, I should drink and try drugs. Like, why not?”

Aren And she did. Not so much the drugs, but Kelly says there weren't many weekends she wasn't getting drunk. I asked if she became an alcoholic. She said she doesn't think so, because alcohol was never what she found herself craving. It was friendship. People who, she felt, liked her for who she was, who she could relax and be imperfect around.

Kelly I think drinking alcohol was fun because it just gave me the sense of like—there's something interesting, when you drink with a bunch of friends it like brings people together. Kind of like food, like food brings people together. And so I think it just gave me a sense of belonging.

But it was something exciting. It was very new, exciting. I was—yeah, I had a lot of fun.

Aren Did your parents know at all about your lifestyle?

Kelly I don't know. I didn't really tell them anything. Sorry parents. [LAUGHS]

Aren What did that do for your relationship with the Church or even potentially with God? How were you doing spiritually during these years?

Kelly Yeah, I think, so spiritually not doing well, right? I didn't really have a relationship with God. But church going? Still doing great. Still going to church, just hungover, you know. I still went to church because I knew like it was just embedded in me that I had to go to church, but I think spiritually I knew that I was not doing well.

Aren Were you happy?

Kelly That's a good question. I don't I don't know if I was—I think I was temporarily happy. I thought I had what I thought was, like, happiness and freedom because for once I could actually live my life the way I thought I wanted to live it. But I don't think I had tasted true happiness and freedom until I removed certain things out of my life.

So, for example, I remember I dated a guy who saw that I always went to church and yet lived a different lifestyle. And he's like, “You're not good enough to go to

church.” And I remember thinking in my head, like, “I’m not good enough to go to church.” Like, I’m actually a really bad person. And it made me feel really ashamed.

Finally, by the time I did process it I was not in that relationship, thankfully, but it was probably years later that I realized that to be a Jesus follower just means to live your life and to follow Jesus. It doesn’t mean that you have to change anything that you do, it’s just like with the disciples did of just, they see Jesus, they follow Him. They didn’t change their life at first, but Jesus was the one that changed their lives.

So, I think after like having that realization I realized, oh, it’s okay for me to go to church despite the fact that I’m struggling with these things. It’s okay for me to attend a church even though I might not be super spiritually strong. I don’t think anyone here is super spiritually strong, I think we’re all in this together, we’re all struggling.

Aren Kelly returned to the Northwest and attended the University of Washington. She was still going out most weekends, until one morning when she woke up and realized she was tired. And she missed church.

Kelly It was kind of like that prodigal son feeling, you wake up and you’re in the midst of pigs and you’re like, what am I doing? And so, I had this turning point where I was like, I want to go to church again, I want to know who God is. I want to have a relationship with Him, but I didn’t know how to do it at the Adventist Church.

Aren She looked around and found a large nondenominational church in the University District. Right on Greek Row. Every Sunday night at 6pm crowds of college students and young adults would flood the church, and so Kelly joined them.

Kelly It was really exciting because everyone was my age. I didn’t really have that growing up. My home church didn’t really have a lot of young people in it and so this was the first time that everyone was around 18 to 25 years old.

And you look around and these people are all like hungover also or they're part of the Greek system or they're also struggling with things, you know, like that you are also struggling with and yet we're all here worshipping together. And so it's just this really awesome feeling of unity, of like, it doesn't matter what you look like you can still come and be a part of our community. You can still come and learn about God.

And so I got really involved in there and after about a year I started realizing, like, I really want to bring this—and I don't know what it is, like, I love the Adventist Church, but I realized I want to bring all of this amazing, you know, music and I want to bring just inclusivity of all of it and how everyone dresses just as they are and they come in and we accept them, I want to bring that into the Adventist Church.

And so I kind of felt like a homing pigeon. I was like, “I must return home and bring all of this new knowledge,” which isn't that new, “back to my own church.” And so I started going back to my church and being more involved there, and trying to bring in just aspects of things that I thought would create a safe place for young adults.

Aren Kelly started by offering to play piano for the service if the church was willing to sing contemporary songs. Which was a bold offer because, in Kelly's words, she, quote, “sucks” at piano. But it was a start. Soon, she was leading once a month, and each time would find 4-5 young adults to lead with her. The church loved it, and more young adults began coming, to the point they wanted to start their own Friday night small group. But who would lead that?

Kelly And me, knowing nothing about anything, I had just started my journey and coming back to the Church, I raised my hand. I was like I want to do it. I want to be involved, I want to help out.

Aren On the first night, they had ten young adults show up. Soon it grew to 20, then 30, then 50. If you look at the group's Facebook page today, there are over 200 people on it. For the first time in a while, Kelly was going to church for more than meeting the bare minimum.

She also hadn't stopped going out, either. She would still drink with friends, mostly celebrations and birthday parties, which she figured might be okay for some, but not for her.

One day Kelly was driving on the freeway to class when the car next to her began veering into her lane. She was in the driver's blind spot and so she tried to get over too, but when she did, her car began to swerve. She wasn't sure why, but she lost control and was headed towards the concrete median at nearly 70 miles an hour. She turned the wheel, facing her in front of oncoming traffic, then continued to spin.

Kelly It felt like eternity that was looking at this Seattle skyline, and all of a sudden I'm flipped back 180 onto the far left side of the freeway, going with traffic. And in that moment I was like, I literally almost died. It was like a normal trafficky day and somehow I made it across three lanes across the freeway, spun 360 degrees, and I'm still safely on the other side. And I was in shock and I just started crying because there was this voice in my head that said, "Kelly, I have more for you." And I didn't know what that meant. But I knew that that was that was something that God was telling me, like, "Kelly there's more for you. Why do you cling on to things from the past when I have so much more newness coming ahead of you?"

And so in that moment I just cried and I was like, "God forgive me. Forgive me for all that I've done and that I—sorry I can't let these things go." And I think that was probably one of the turning points of realizing like there's so much more for me, I just have to be actively asking God and looking for it. And so, I think after that I actually stopped, like cold turkey stopped drinking.

Aren Kelly saw this as her second chance. When a pastor asked her shortly after to become a ministry leader on campus, she didn't hesitate. When a different pastor invited her to tour across the country and speak in churches, prisons, and homeless shelters, she packed her bags. She says ministry began bringing her fulfillment like she'd never felt before. And here's where that word "calling" comes in, because ministry wasn't Kelly's calling, was it?

Kelly I would say in 2015 I was kind of like, maybe I should do ministry, this is something that I've been starting to put into my heart and after the woman's ordination didn't pass, I was so discouraged. And so I was like, I'm just going to go into medicine, which is like 10 times worse. [LAUGHS] I'm just kidding.

Aren She begins work as a surgical tech, does that for several years before applying for medical school. Kelly says she submitted 30 applications, got two interviews. One of them accepted her. And what followed was the hardest year of her life, as medical school often is. But it wasn't just the ruthless exam schedule, things just didn't fit. She wasn't motivated like before. And then came 2020.

Kelly Pandemic hit, I got super depressed. I remember there was this time when I was just crying on my bed because I was like God, I am just, this is over for me. I can't study, I am so unhappy and I feel like a failure. So I'm crying on my bed and I just felt this immense peace wash over me and just something told me, I think it was God, just telling me like, "Be still. You're going to be okay." And immediately like all my anxiety just kind of dissipated in that one hour. I think after that I started thinking again and I got anxiety again but for that one hour I was just very much at peace.

I think my failures have taught me so much more about myself and I can connect with other people even more. In fact, I would say I even thank God, I thank God every day actually that I'm not in med school now because it just wasn't fit for me.

It's fit for many other people, thank you Jesus for doctors and people in healthcare.

Aren Amen, amen.

Kelly Amen. But it's just not for me.

Aren For as much as Kelly may have wanted to ignore it, she knew that the times she was happiest was when she was leading in church. Which is a scary thing for someone who thought they'd be a doctor, for someone who is the granddaughter of Pastor David Lin, or

for a woman who's been told by a lot of people, including some who live in a bus, that she can't.

But she is. After leaving medical school she took a job as a pastoral intern at the church on the same campus, where about 75 young adults were actively participating in small groups. Only, that number's since tripled. They even hold an annual weekend conference where you can come to worship, hear speakers, and, if you like, go around with a microphone and ask people questions about Adventism.

Aren Did your experience with rejection and depression—does it help you as a young adult ministry leader at all?

Kelly Oh yes, absolutely. I would say a lot of young adults are depressed and anxious. I think that's kind of baseline for Millennials and Gen Z now. And that's kind of sad. I think, you know, a lot of 2020 kind of messed us up, but it's the reality of things, and I think if you don't understand depression and anxiety, it's very hard to connect with people.

So, a lot of the conversations I've had with girls of like what they're experiencing and I'm able to sit and listen, no part of me wants to be like, "Well, have you tried praying about it?" You know, no part of me wants to be like, "Have you tried exercising, you get natural endorphins?" you know. That is not anything I want to push on to anyone. In fact, it's just made me more understanding.

Aren What can we in Adventism learn from the experience of a young adult who is partying? Is there any lesson that the Church could gain from what you learned while you were not as involved in the Church?

Kelly Yeah, I would say anytime I see someone who isn't living life the way that I do, I want to understand why. I think if once you have that relationship with someone you understand them better, it gives you a different perspective of why people are doing some of the things that they do. In fact, I think I'm way more progressive and

gracious towards other people's lives than I am to my own. I think I'm more willing to understand someone else's story than maybe my own. Maybe I should go to my therapist for that. [LAUGHS]

Aren I was going to ask, is that healthy and is that good?

Kelly I think there's a level of recognition from my part of realizing I went through something very similar. For the Church, I would say I think it's so easy for people to see someone come in from the streets or someone come in hungover and just immediately judge them. You know, you smell alcohol on them or you smell weed on them and you think that person is terrible. How could you come to church like that? But the fact that they're coming to church in the first place, despite whatever else they're feeling, that is a huge blessing that they still want to come.

So, I would say I would embrace that person, I would want to get to know them, I would want to have a conversation of, like, "Hey, even if you're feeling like you want to smoke weed before coming to church, I still want you here. I want to have that conversation with you. I want to embrace you." And I think through the actions, I think churches are so good at speaking about what they think people should do, but it's the actions that really mean the most to young adults. And so if you say, like, "We care about young adults" and yet you kick us out of the Church because we smell like weed or alcohol, I think that speaks louder volumes. But if you were to say, "Hey, that's okay, come in. In fact, we have a chair right next to me, come sit next to me. And hey, come and have lunch with us afterwards, we'd love to have you." If that's a way to embrace people, I think anyone would want to be a part of that community.

Aren I think I've got just one last question which is, you know, you mentioned at the beginning that you come from a family with grandparents who were kind of legends in ministry. If your grandparents could see their granddaughter Kelly as she is now, what do you think they would say?

Kelly I think they would be surprised. In fact, no one has ever thought that I would be a minister. I remember one of our family friends came up to me, she saw me at one of the churches and she said, “Kelly, we never thought it would have been you. We thought it would always be your dad or your brother, but to think that it's you like, that's incredible.” And it gave me a lot of hope of, wow, we're making cultural and generational changes and we're making what a pastor used to look like and reimagining that into what a pastor in a modern-day society looks like. So I think my grandparents would be really surprised and probably extremely proud.

I would say the person who I think would be the most proud though would be my late aunt. My family would always say I'm the most like my aunt Angelina. She passed away unfortunately last year from cancer. We were very close and I think if anything she would be so incredibly proud to see that, you know, I took what I thought was a failure and created into a success.

But it also just goes to show, like, God never wants us to suffer, but there are so many times that He can create opportunities for us to be a blessing for others and to be able to learn from the things that maybe we've deemed as failures, but in His eyes are considered successes.

Aren Kelly doesn't know if pastoring is her “calling,” but she does know it's where she belongs for now. And sometimes it's nice to know where you belong.

Aren Well Kelly, we know a little bit more about you now and your experience. And I asked you if you would be willing to write a short letter to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Can we hear that?

Kelly Yes. Let me just pull this out.

Aren And like a true millennial she doesn't pull out paper and pen—

Kelly Oh heck no.

Aren She opens up her iPhone to her Notes app...

Kelly I think it's in my Notes app. Got it.

Dear Church,

To the young adults who are still in the Church, thank you for being here. I think there are many times that I have felt like I've wanted to leave, but it's people like you that make me want to stay. If I was to walk into your church tomorrow, I would feel more represented. If I had questions about how to live my life as a young adult, you're there. You're the ones who are making changes, who are pouring into a Church that maybe others have given up on and I commend you for that. So thank you for being here. It means a lot.

To the Church of people who are a little bit older than me, I want to say thank you, as well. Because of you, our Church has continued to stay alive. Because of you, your monetary donations, your dedication, all the things that you do mean so much to the livelihood of our ministry. I think of all the older people who pour their time into making potluck happen and they're all gray haired and I love that. I love that we can be a community that is multi-generational.

I also ask this one thing: Could you perhaps sit down and listen? Could you understand and build a relationship with someone who's maybe younger than you, maybe in my generation or in the Gen Z's? They might be a little bit more tough to talk to though. Whatever it is, I just hope that you're able to understand our experiences and that we can also understand yours, because we're all the body of Christ and without you and without me there would be no Church. So, thank you. And hopefully we'll be friends soon.

Sincerely,

Kelly

Aren Kelly, thank you so much.

Kelly Thank you for having me.

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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.

Special thanks to today's guest, Kelly Lin Dickinson. Since we spoke, Kelly has begun working on her Master's in Ministry, which she loves. And she has married her best friend, Logan, who works as a nurse and helps lead worship at Kelly's church.

To learn more about this project, visit seccyouth.com/dearchurch—and if you would be so kind, please subscribe to the show and leave us a rating and review so more people can find us. We'll be back next week with another episode of *Dear Church* where we will meet a new young adult, and we hope you join us there.