

AN ORIGINAL PODCAST SERIES PRESENTED BY SECC YOUTH

Dear CHURCH,



Episode 7: Jenn

Official Transcript

Jenn Okay ladies. Okay, do you guys want to tell me what did you guys think about the movie? Can we process it for a second?

Aren This is a gathering that took place last month of teen girls who attend the same church. Right now, you're listening as they debrief the movie *Inside Out 2*, which they just finished watching in the theater.

Girl 1 Like it was a little bit cringey but it was also surprisingly relatable.

Jenn What was cringey?

Girl 1 It's just, I think the very beginning of it was very like, a little bit overexaggerated. It was reasonable and it made sense. But it kind of made it seem a little bit too childish. But then later it got, like, way more like interesting, way more, like, oh shoot, yeah!

[LAUGHTER]

Aren This ministry is called Bloom. For the past few years, they've gathered each month, usually in a home, to talk about life and study the Bible. But sometimes they'll go out too.

Here you can hear the girls sharing the ways they related to the shame of the movie characters, including when one of them starts puberty.

Girl 2 So the thing that I found interesting was puberty—like, when that puberty button came, like, I knew the pimple was going to be there, right? And I knew the awkward was going to be there. But there was no, like, awkward limbs and arms. She didn't have any of those things and I was like, oh, that's interesting. She's really coordinated for someone going through a growth spurt.

[LAUGHTER]

Jenn Young teen girls need to be in a space where they can talk about the things that teen girls struggle with.

Aren This is Jenn, the leader of Bloom.

Jenn We want to create a space where they can have conversations that we're not having in Sabbath School.

Girl 3 I related so much to still liking *Bluey*.

Jenn Like the things you liked as a kid, but you don't want to admit that you still like them.

Girl 3 Yeah.

Girl 4 I remember my shame was that I still liked *My Little Pony*.

All Awww...

Aren Jenn's not a pastor. She's not a teacher or an employee of the Church. She's just a young adult who cares—and the reasons why, and what has led her to this moment, might surprise

you. Today on *Dear Church*, the story of a woman whose heart for the Church and for young people can only be understood once you hear where she's been—and the moment she's waiting for right now.

Jenn Hi, I'm Jenn, and this is *Dear Church*.

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Aren Jenn, thank you for being with us on *Dear Church* today.

Jenn Yeah, thank you for having me.

Aren How are you feeling about having this interview?

Jenn I'm excited. I'm passionate about these kind of conversations, but I'm a little nervous. I don't know why, but I'm excited.

Aren Have you ever been on a podcast before?

Jenn Never. And I think that's why.

Aren Yeah, makes sense...

Aren Jenn may be a first-time podcast guest, but she's no stranger to the bright lights. She grew up in Las Vegas, which she says was a great city to have a childhood. Her parents immigrated there separately from Colombia before meeting and getting married. Her dad wasn't Adventist, but he fell in love with her mom who was, and soon, he was too. They served as leaders in their Hispanic church, and then became parents, first to a son, and then to twin girls. Jenn's a middle child by four minutes.

Jenn It was just a really great childhood. And a lot of it did take part in our church, right? So we grew up actually in a conservative Spanish church. You know, just the

lack of women representation up on the pulpit. Of course, how females dress, so there was no either short sleeves or sleeveless. Things like that.

Aren When Jenn was 10 years old, her family and several others moved to a larger, multi-ethnic church. Their new pastor let them meet as a Spanish group in the gym, but Jenn's family also began to assimilate into their new church community.

Jenn We felt extremely welcomed. We had a female pastor, that was so nice and we thought it was so cool because we'd never seen that before. It was a really great experience, but I do remember being intimidated because we're so used to this Spanish Adventist conservative church culture.

Aren So you touched on this a little bit but what did it mean for young Jenn to all of a sudden have a female pastor?

Jenn I remember being very happy to see that and excited, but because she was so kind. She was different than the other pastors I was used to, and she was so sweet. Her and her husband were very kind with our family. And I loved it when she spoke, she smiled when she preached and I just remember it being super new, but also eventually recognizing that it was so rare because I believe that was the only church—we have multiple churches in Las Vegas, I believe that ours was the only church that had a female pastor. But I just thought it was really great.

Aren Jenn's love for the Church began to blossom. She got involved in church ministries and youth group. Her parents would help teach Sabbath School, and her family would lead worship on stage. For them, church wasn't just a weekly one-hour appointment, it was what their lives revolved around.

And then, one day when Jenn was in middle school, her parents called the kids into their room to let them know they were getting a divorce. She felt blindsided.

Jenn It was a very vivid like, oh, this is happening, but this can't happen to us. We're the Ariza family, right? Very next day at our academy, it was Valentine's Day, so we did Valentine's, like, the cards we used to pass around to people and the friends would give each other things. And I remember having this memory, my sister and I were really sad. Like, it's weird celebrating a day of love when our parents just told us they're divorcing. But I just remember how vivid that was.

Aren How did the church support you after the separation?

Jenn I remember us not really talking about it with people. It was just an expected, we felt embraced more. The lead pastor and his wife and their kids, they would invite us over their house more. And this was the senior pastor, right? He and his wife have million other ministries that they can do and so many other people they can attend to, but I just remember them being extra present for my brother, my sister, and I.

If we did not have that church at that time, I don't know what would have happened. I don't know what would have felt consistent. Like, the inconsistency of your parents splitting up, there's this—the harmony's out of place. There's this balance that's out of place. And the fact that we still had the same place of worship and still had that same community added a stability that, I mean, we needed desperately. And I think my parents needed it too.

Just the common thing that I always come back to is how the Church was present and embraced us during the most transitional part of our life, the hardest time in our life.

But yeah, the Church really fully embraced us in the midst of that change.

Aren Church remained an anchor for Jenn throughout high school, all the way up to when she moved to California for college. Her dream was to get into nursing school, eventually get her BSN, and then move back to Las Vegas to start a career and a family.

But getting into nursing school proved challenging. She didn't excel in her science classes, and each time she applied, she wasn't accepted. She says her self-esteem had never been lower. One day she found herself face to face with the director of the nursing program.

Jenn I went into her office and I didn't have a meeting with her, but I was crying and I said, "I keep getting rejected. What should I do to get into the nursing program?" And she said, "Jenn, why do you want to be a nurse?" And I said, "I really just want to be in a profession that helps people. And I know that sounds cheesy, but I feel like that's what I need to do."

And she said, "There are so many other professions that help people." And she said, "Have you ever heard of social work?" I was like, "I don't even know what that is." And so, she said, "What I recommend is next quarter, take this specific class and this will be your introduction to this field and if this is something that sparks your interest then pursue that, change your major."

I felt very discouraged because I said, you know, in my mind, like this is the lead, like this is the head of the nursing department and she's encouraging me to not do the thing that I've been wanting to do since I was a teenager.

Aren Still, she figured it wouldn't hurt to take the class. It was called "America's Social Problems." It covered everything from poverty to child welfare to wrongful imprisonment. Jenn says her eyes got wide on the first day. She loved it. So, now what?

Jenn And I remember one specific moment. I don't run a lot, but I went running in the Back 40, the beautiful running trails at the back of PUC campus, and I don't know if this was like my conscience or the Holy Spirit, but I heard saying, "Jenn, you're going to be a social worker." It was something along those, like, "Jenn, you're going to be a social worker. Jenn, you know, you need to change to social work." But it was this very like, "Come on," right? And I remember that moment exactly where I was, and I started crying. And so, I changed my major. And to this day, I'm still a social worker.

Aren It's interesting because when this nursing department chair says to you, or brings the idea of social work to you, you weren't even sure what that was.

Jenn Yes.

Aren And I think a lot of people now have heard of the career social worker, but they don't really know what it does. What do you do, Jenn, as a social worker?

Jenn So social work is a field that's dedicated to helping groups of people with specific needs and connecting them to those needs through resources, counseling, therapy, policy changing. It's a profession that helps specific groups of people in different ways.

Aren Yeah. And as somebody who said I want to help people, that seems like a good fit.

Jenn Yeah, that was—I'm like, man, I appreciate that with my field and my degree is that I get to directly work with people that are in a state of need and I want to help with that.

Aren Her first position was as a case manager working with veterans experiencing homelessness. Then she worked at a resource center helping lower income families apply for medical coverage. Then she worked one-on-one with children that had behavioral issues or open CPS cases. That last position was the most challenging, but also the most rewarding. Jenn always knew she wanted to work with kids. Currently she works for a non-profit helping children be matched to foster parents.

Jenn I definitely do feel like I'm in the field that I'm supposed to be in. But it's hard, it's very draining. There have been times where I don't like that I care—oh man, this sounds very—I don't like that I care so much about the people I work for because I take it home with me.

And in social work and mental health field, we have this term “compassion fatigue,” right, where the level of compassion and empathy that you feel towards the people that you serve physically affect you. And so that can lead to burnout, that can lead to body aches because you're just tired. And so, I recognize that when I do feel that I need to—another word we use is “self-care,” we have to take care of ourselves.

Aren What can somebody, I guess specifically a care provider, what can they do about compassion fatigue? Is the answer to care less? Or, I mean, you mention self-care. Are you supposed to remedy that, or does that just come with the line of work?

Jenn That's a great question. It comes with the line of work, but there are some things in our control. I tell myself, I can speak for myself, there's only so much that I can do. And why it's important to be vocal, actually, when you're experiencing compassion fatigue is because you need to hear that from your colleagues and your supervisor as well. Sometimes you need to hear from the people that are in it with you, “Hey, you've done what you needed to do and you need to let this go and get a good night's rest.” And the rest is, it's not your responsibility and it's not on you. So, I think it's that self-talk, recognizing the reality that there is only so much that we can do.

The compassion and empathy part is never going to change for me. But I need to recognize when to set those boundaries.

Aren It's probably what makes you a good social worker, but it also makes it hard at the same time for you.

Jenn Yes.

Aren Jenn, can you share an experience in your career of social work that was especially impactful upon you or maybe even challenging with the compassion fatigue?

Jenn A really tough part that I had to experience last year in this job was I would get a phone call from a foster parent very upset at this teenager for having very age-appropriate teenage behaviors. It was something like, “Attitude because they had to clean chores,” and “Their tone is very passive aggressive,” and “In this home, we speak to each other respectfully.” And you know, “In this home, everyone's responsibility as a teenager or in high school is to get a C and above. And she's not doing that.”

I would have to as a social worker remind and explain to them, we call it “trauma informed lens,” like, let's approach this in—this child has experienced trauma. This teenager has been in and out of foster care her entire life. Her main priority is not getting an A in history, right? Her main priority is thinking about her siblings that she's not with right now, and she's sad about that. Recognizing that she has a biological mother and father out there that want nothing to do with her. This is where her mind is at. This is her reality.

And so, one specific day they called me extremely upset and so they were very insistent that I come and pick her up and find her a new foster home. It was one of the most stressful days of my job. And we had to go down the roster of all these foster families that we have, “Hey, we need to find a foster home right now for a teen girl!”

And as soon as we said teen, everyone's like, “Nope.”

Aren She was eventually able to find a home that would accept the girl. It was in a different city, two hours away. Jenn went over to the home and quickly loaded her things into her trunk and began the long drive.

Jenn I turn off the radio and I said, “Vent, go.” You know, “No filter. How are you feeling? Go.” And no filter. She just would say, “It's so—I hate being in foster care. It's already hard enough being a teenager, but being a teenager in a home with people that don't really like you or want you there and they're not your mom or dad is horrible.”

So that's what's really hard is just kind of being in the reality that kids are rejected every day and having to help them feel better about themselves in the midst of that. And that's hard.

Aren You have a heart for kids, don't you?

Jenn Yes.

Aren Where does that come from?

Jenn I think it came from my church. Really. Growing up in a church community where kids and teenagers were embraced and there were specific things in place to cater to these kids.

And so, I recognize the impact that adults can have on children and youth because I experienced that myself when I was 13. We were going through a really rough time and people stepped up. And a lot of those people were people in the church, adults and parents. And I've always felt this duty to the next generation because I had that in one small way.

Aren Even though your parents were never out of your life, the Church did provide some fostering in its own way.

Jenn Yes.

Aren And now you are paying that forward.

Jenn Yes.

Jenn What was the most relatable part?

Girl 1 The “I’m not good enough” hit really hard, when like, the first time they said it I was just like. That part, I started sobbing.

Jenn Did you guys notice it started getting louder throughout the movie?

Girls Uh huh. Yes.

Girl 1 It was really rough.

Girl 4 All the emotions, like, taking over...

Aren It wasn’t only as a child that Jenn felt fostered by her church. When she finished college, she didn’t have a job yet, and so she went back home not sure of what to do—the typical millennial grad who moves back home with mom. And she knew it. But, she also knew there was one place where she would never be seen as a stereotype.

Jenn These adults that saw me as a child but now seeing me as an adult, they really embraced me. They invited me to be part of conversations of, hey, we’re going to plan the Christmas program, do you want to be part of the conversation and let us know what you think?

I felt so seen. The people in the church really stood up and took me in and empowered me and gave me this like confidence that I didn’t know I had and eventually I was ordained as an elder. I was the youngest elder that was ordained at our church, I was 24. Because the pastors saw me and they said, “You have something to bring to the table and we want you here and please don’t go anywhere.”

I felt that if this is church, this is what I want to be part of for the rest of my life.

Aren Jenn soon did get that first job, one that sent her back to California. Two months later, she met her husband Jacob at a Bible study. They were married in less than a year. He’s an introvert, something that balances well with how outgoing Jenn is. He’s also a nurse

practitioner—she appreciates the irony. Jenn and Jacob love traveling and going on regular adventures together. This summer they're visiting their twelfth national park.

In 2022, Jenn completed her Master's in Social Work and began working with the agency she's with now. Which also brought something new that she hadn't done before: overseeing the adoption process for families.

Jenn There was a couple that were waiting for over two years to adopt. They were a same-sex couple, and so for them, that is their only option at this point was adoption. And I remember that when we got a phone call from the county saying, hey, we have a little three-year-old boy that is ready to be matched. That's the term that we use that needs a family right now to adopt him. Instantly I told my supervisor like, my couple, they've been waiting forever, and this is exactly what they wanted. And, I mean, this little boy needed a home. He had a very rough past, and he had no mom or dad that was stepping up to care for him. No one in his family.

And the county worker asked the parents in front of me, "Do you guys want to see a picture of him?" And they said, "Yes." And she showed him a picture and they both started crying. They're like, "This is our son." I started crying. My supervisor was there and six months later they signed adoption papers. And I was part of that.

That was just such a testament to what we do. Working in the foster adoption realm is very specific, right? And so, families that adopt have to go through the fostering process and there's a lot of hard stuff that happens within the fostering.

It was just beautiful to see that people have the capability of loving kiddos that don't necessarily come from them. But it was very encouraging to see that.

Aren Yeah.

Jenn Especially with what my husband and I have gone through.

He was getting ready to finish his nurse practitioner program, his doctorate program. And we said, okay, now this is the time that we can start maybe trying for a family. You know, you're going to be out of grad school and you're going to be this fancy doctor. We can have one income, I can stay home. Like, let's try to start a family.

And so, for about two years we tried and we didn't know why, and we got tested and even during lockdown we're like, oh, this is perfect timing to try to start a family, you know.

March 2021 we were diagnosed with infertility. We were devastated. We cried together. We held each other. That reality of we're not going to be able to get pregnant? Am I never going to be pregnant? We're not going to have children that come from us? Yes, adoption is beautiful, but wait, this is also sad.

I was so mad at God. And I think that a lot of people can resonate with this, is that sometimes when you're in the trial, I need to be mad at someone. And it's easy to be mad at the person you love the most or that you're most comfortable with, and that was God. And so I was so mad at Him for not making this easy for us. But I also knew that I had friends that could pray on my behalf, right? Or lift me up in prayer or affirm me saying it's okay to be angry.

Aren What made this harder for Jenn was that she wasn't in Vegas anymore. She couldn't find comfort in the pews of her home church, the one that had been there for her when her parents divorced and been there again when she came home from college. But her and Jacob had found a church they loved in California, and so they began having conversations with other members to help them figure out what to do next. One of those even included the senior pastor, who had adopted children herself. The church may have changed, but the amount of support didn't.

Jenn We experienced the toughest moment in our marriage and we were able to go to, not just our family, but our church family and our pastors and those within our

church community that have also adopted, and we went to them for encouragement and advice and we quickly went to our resources and that resource was our church.

And so, 2022 was the year of healing. And by the end of that year we said, no, we definitely, we definitely want kids. And so, at the beginning of 2023, we started our adoption process.

Aren Jenn, what was it like as a social worker who has been intimately involved in making pairings for foster parents and foster children, to then be on the other side and having you be studied and applying for approval. What was that like for you?

Jenn It was actually really great. It was so fun. I would tell Jacob, you know, leading up to, hey, our social worker's coming tomorrow, this is probably what she's gonna ask.

Aren Yeah, it's almost like having the answers to the test ahead of time.

Jenn Yes, yes! She's gonna be looking for a fire extinguisher and first aid kits, and we gotta get on that.

Aren [LAUGHS] That's so good.

Jenn It was exciting. And it was just so interesting to like, to be on the other end and being reminded—me being in my field, I'm reminded people have the ability to love children whether or not they came from you. I always remember that, and so it was exciting.

Aren Not surprisingly, Jenn and Jacob passed the evaluation, and were approved for adoption last year. Now, they wait. A pregnant mother can view their profile, and if she chooses them, they'll get the phone call they've been dreaming of. But they have no idea how long that could take.

Aren Is there anything that the Church has done for you guys that has either made your journey more difficult or has made your journey better? And I'm asking this in the context of, what is it good for the Church to know for people who are going through this journey, because you're certainly not the only one.

Jenn Yes. Thank you for asking that, because when we started this process, we recognized the conversation of adoption and fertility is not talked about a lot in the Church because of the emphasis on family planning and children ministries and once you're married, "When are you, when's the baby coming?" It's very family oriented and that's okay, but when you're in this kind of situation, you really recognize how unseen you are.

Mother's Day and Father's Day is very hard for couples that experience infertility. Or that have that strong desire to be a parent and they're not yet. So, something that my church has done is on Mother's Day Sabbath, they don't just say, "The mothers stand up," they say, "Women of influence in this church stand up." I've noticed that in the last few years that language has been changing to be more inclusive for the people that want and desire to be part of that community.

And so, I remember at our church the first Mother's Day Sabbath where that was brought up, I felt so seen. And, you know, for those that want to be parents, being a mom or a dad is like this club that you really want to be part of. And days like Mother's Day and Father's Day is such a stark reminder that you're not part of the club yet.

I have personally chosen in my own journey not to physically attend Mother's Day or Father's Day church. Jacob and I have both decided that since we found out about infertility, for the sake of protecting ourselves, and you have to do that. But we do watch online and that's something that is constantly brought up. And so, the language around days like Mother's Day and Father's Day, and I, I just saw that in my church. I never saw that or noticed that in other churches or my home church. And so that was a way that I felt supported and seen.

Aren So, you're in the waiting season right now.

Jenn Yes.

Aren You're—Literally, this phone call could come at anytime.

Jenn Yes.

Aren What's it like to be in that waiting space?

Jenn That is when scripture is the most real, is in moments and trials, in seasons like this. In the Bible, it encourages us to wait on the Lord, and it resonates with me more when I have to hold on to those verses. And so, waiting is difficult.

But the way Jacob and I have described it is we are okay in the wait. And it's difficult at times, and Mother's Day and Father's Day comes around, the holidays sometimes reminds you of, oh it's a new season and maybe this time next year we'll have our baby and—but in the in between, we're okay.

We're both in jobs that we love so much. We have an amazing church and social community, so we have a social life. We have the community, we have positive relationship with our families. We really like spending time together, we love adventuring and traveling and you know, we pray a big prayer that we have to God is saying put it on our hearts on what we need to do while we wait. And so, we are reading baby books and how to sleep train and there's also specific books about adoption and let's, you know, let's buy some onesies if we can. And, you know, we want to believe it's going to happen, and it will, so let's act like it. And we have like a bassinet, a crib, a stroller, a car seat.

Aren Wow.

Jenn Yeah. And we have the space where we're going to put all of that in our little apartment And so I told Jacob, "Hey, I went to Target the other day and I found some onesies that are unisex." And he was like, "Great, let's add it to the pile." I have friends that, "Hey, you know, I have these like really cute onesies, these that would be great for a boy or a girl." And I'm like, "Great, let's add it to the pile." And so we're with the seasonal waiting, we're collecting and preparing and, yeah.

Aren There's some kid who's gonna be so lucky to have you and Jacob as their parents.

Jenn Thank you so much.

Aren You're gonna be the best mom.

Jenn Thank you so much.

Jenn At the very end, right, where it all matters. You can't just suppress or like ignore all the things. It all has to come together.

Girl 5 You gotta balance out your emotions.

Girl 1 Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Jenn Can we take a picture?

Girl 5 Yay, pictures!

All Ayyyy!

[LAUGHTER]

Aren Jenn, you have a deep love for the Church, and a deep love for Adventism. I also know that you don't think the Church is perfect. How do you reconcile as a young adult the things you are frustrated with with the Adventist Church, yet still being fully committed to it?

Jenn I think something that I've really developed and something that I've learned was inclusivity, right? And recognizing that this huge, beautiful denomination that I'm a part of may not be good at that sometimes.

If some things about my Church don't reflect the love of God, God's love and the picture that I have of God is always going to trump whatever picture I have of the Church. I am a Seventh-day Adventist. I believe that Jesus is coming again and I believe that Sabbath is the seventh day. But I've also seen the beautiful ways that the Church has shown up in my life personally.

And so, my role, and I'm very involved in my church and you know, I have influence, right, over these teenagers and if I can show God's love in whatever way I can, I need to focus on that so that I can show God's love to those that need Him.

Jenn Okay, so I'm going to read Matthew 18:19-20. This is Jesus speaking, so you know it's true, right? Okay. "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for it, but it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them." Okay, what is the truth in this verse?

Girl 6 That God's always with us.

Jenn Yes. He's with us and He hears us. That's huge, you guys. And this really resonated with me...

Aren I asked if you would write a letter to the Adventist Church. I'm wondering if we can hear that.

Jenn Sure.

Dear Church,

I see God in you. Sometimes and some days it can be a challenge to do that, but I do see God in you. I see that you're made-up of people that believe in a very loving God, and I see that people that make up the Church are also hurt and flawed. We as the Church need to continue doing the work that we were called to do, which is to bring others to Christ. We need to be Jesus to the people that need him the most. We know what that looks like, so let's get to work. Let's show our community who Christ really is and what His people can do.

Church, I know that you are good. I know that you are love, and I know that sometimes you do not show Jesus accurately or show a misunderstood picture of Him to your people. But I do know that you do the best that you can. We can do better and heal those that have been hurt by the Church, so let's correct our wrongs and love the way we need to love.

Church, you're more than a building. You are a people, a needed community. I'm committed to be the Church that welcomes, loves, and accepts. I may fail at times, but that's because I'm a sinner. But Church, I am committed to you, because you are committed to Christ.

Dear Church, I am not going anywhere.

Love,
Jenn

Aren Jenn, thank you so much.

Jenn You're welcome.

Aren For the conversation, for the story, for the letter.

Jenn Yeah. Thank you for having me and for having these conversations. They're important.

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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 our guest today, Jenn Maxwell. Since we spoke, Jenn has continued in her career as a social worker, and in meeting with the girls from Bloom. This summer, her and Jacob have enjoyed more traveling, camping, and cheering on Colombia in the Olympics. As of early August 2024, they're still waiting to receive their phone call.

This marks episode seven of this ten-part series, and we would still really appreciate you subscribing and leaving a rating and review. If you would like to learn more about the show and find full episode transcripts, visit our website, seccyouth.com/DearChurch. Thank you so much for listening, we will be back next week with episode eight, and we hope to see you there.