



Episode 10: Finale

Official Transcript

Aren So, one morning, earlier this year, I arrived at work like I do most days. Through the back entrance, up the stairs, into the youth department at SECC.

Aren Good morning.

Aren I walked into my office, and there waiting for me was a voicemail. So, I signed in and hit “play.” And this is what was waiting for me.

[VOICE MESSAGE]

You have one new message.

Good afternoon, Aren. I'm sorry I didn't quite get the proper pronunciation of your last name. I'm just a concerned parent/grandparent as far as having a solid, responsible shepherding ministry for our young adults, college age students, who are just pretty much left to fend for themselves and to wander off and drift off, which is exactly what they're doing...

Aren The woman's name was Claudette. I had never spoken to her before—not that you would know that from the message. She shared that her granddaughter had come out our way for college, and not been connected with any church group. Instead, Claudette felt, she was left to drift away on her own, another victim to the church's

collective indifference towards young adults. And so she was calling to find out how we could let this happen. Specifically, how I could let this happen.

Claudette I'm just wondering, you know, if you and your committee, youth ministries directors are really trying to address and grapple with this issue. I just don't understand why we just leave our young adults to flounder and we claim that they're the church of tomorrow, but there won't be any church if we're not shepherding them and guiding them and helping them to get our young people and keeping them out of the club. And when they wander away and they stray, some of them die while they're out there, and nobody cares. Nobody cares. And they reprimand them, they, you know, berate them for making those choices, but we're not giving them an alternative. And I'm just so hurt and so disappointed at what I'm seeing. I'm just wondering if you have any ideas for me. Thank you.

Aren I think I listened to Claudette's voicemail four times. And each time, I was left with the same thought: I get it. These were the words of a grieving grandmother who entrusted the Church to welcome her loved one in, maybe when she was away from home for the first time, and it didn't happen. Why it didn't, I didn't know, of course. But all that mattered right now, for Claudette, is that it didn't. And so she assumes that the reason must be that we don't really care. At least, not enough to actually fix the problem.

For the past nine weeks, we've shared the stories of young adults in the Adventist community—some who see the Church as a source of hope, others who see it as a source of pain, and most who kind of see it as both. As was mentioned at the beginning, not every voice has been represented here, unfortunately. But I can say that over the past nine weeks, we've aimed for *Dear Church* to be an amplifier of young adult voices, because, and I'm probably not the one who gets to make this judgment, but we really do care. The Church is better when young adults are helping to lead it, and when every generation feels valued. And maybe the best way to actually bring that to reality is for us to make listening our number one priority.

This is now episode 10 of *Dear Church*, the finale to this miniseries. Back in our first episode, I shared my experience asking several young adults what they want to say to the Adventist Church. I got all kinds of answers.

Woman 1 Wake up. It's time to do something, it's time to make change.

Man 1 I think I would say to be more inclusive.

Man 2 We have to continue the message that we love people.

Woman 2 Don't be afraid to talk about things that are uncomfortable. Just bring things up because it's like the elephant in the room.

Woman 3 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.

Aren And that led to actually sitting down with young adults to hear not only what they had to say, but to learn who they are. Which I hope has been as enlightening for you as it has been for me.

But there was an even earlier genesis to this project. Several instances when young voices were stifled or ignored. One in particular several years ago when an academy week of prayer invited students to share their hopes for Adventism. I thought it was brilliant and took a lot of courage from the students. But rather than the response being one of universal gratitude, many adults reacted with outrage. There was even harsh articles written about the students online. I couldn't believe it. "No wonder the young people are leaving," I thought. "If that's the Church we've become."

I think my hope is that that's not who we've become. And, based upon the response we've gotten to *Dear Church*, I don't think we have. I think a lot of us want to keep

listening. And so, to wrap things up, I thought we'd lean even further into it, by listening to more voices—but this time, from other generations. What do they have to say? And where do we go from here?

Hi. I'm Aren. And this is *Dear Church*.

• • •

Aren To start things off, I wanted to think of somebody from an older generation. Someone who has opinions and isn't afraid to share them. And, yeah, I had somebody in mind.

[PHONE RING]

Claudette May I help you?

Aren Hi, I'm looking for Claudette.

Claudette How can I help you?

Aren Hi, Claudette. This is Pastor Aren Rennacker from the conference office in California.

Claudette Oh, hello.

Aren How are you?

Claudette I'm well, and you?

Aren I'm good. I'm good. I don't know if you recall, but you had left a message a little while back...

Aren Claudette is 71 years old. She lives in Georgia and is a proud conservative. I wasn't quite sure what to expect from returning Claudette's call, but she seemed happy to talk, almost surprised to hear back from me. When I asked about recording the call, she gladly agreed.

Claudette I do remember well, and thanks for calling back.

Aren I started by asking Claudette what she thinks we can do to help our young adults stay in the Church. She was ready.

Claudette I think we have got to get away from the 1940s models, '60s model, because we're dealing with a whole different culture and I'm afraid that we're not competing, as it were, or giving them a positive alternative.

You know, this whole mentality of the Sabbath morning, center stage and you throw the ball out in the congregation and everybody's supposed to have their hands up to catch it and go home with their legs crossed and say, "Thank you, pastor, that was a good sermon." And that's it. And Saturday night comes and they got to go from where they feel that they're understood, accepted.

Aren What I'm hearing you saying, Claudette, is we need to be able to meet our young adults where they're at.

Claudette Exactly! Our young people like to go to clubs. Okay, why do they go to the club? Is it because they want to dance so hard that they make a hole in the floor? To shake off their add Adventist convictions? They just want to hang out and, and associate and fellowship. So we could have Christian clubs or call it Saturday Night Cafe. And, you know, you could have guitarists, you could have people who want to do, you know, the open mic stuff and poetry and sitting down to tables. Cafe style or club style, but with a Christian focus.

We just got to touch the pulse and get down with them in the trench!

Aren Claudette was not raised Adventist. She was baptized into the Church at 18, and for the first two years, wasn't enjoying it. But then a woman at her church personally invited her to join a midweek Bible study group. That's when things changed. It struck me that she herself had once been a young adult growing disillusioned with Adventism, until a personal invitation changed that.

Claudette You know the concern I have is that we often in theory refer to them as the church of tomorrow. But what are we doing to nurture, maintain, and foster that? It's not just going to happen just by thinking about it. You know, we have to be proactive. We have to be intentional. What are we doing about that?

Aren Yes. And we need to make sure they know that we love them.

Claudette Exactly! They have to feel the love and the acceptance.

Aren Claudette, thank you so much for the time. I really appreciate it and I hope we can talk again in the future.

Claudette I hope so, Sir. Thank you so much for calling and I'll be praying.

Aren If at any time you want to talk more, this is my number, okay?

Claudette Thank you, Sir.

Aren Okay. God bless you.

Claudette Thank you. Bye bye.

Aren I think I've made a new friend. Thank you so much to Claudette for talking with me. Next time, I may ask her to write a letter.

As I thought about the next generation I needed to hear from, one person kept coming to mind: My mother-in-law. But that interview could not be done remotely, it had to be done in person. And so, I left my office early on a Wednesday, microphone in hand, and made the drive to her place of work to conduct an interview unlike any I'd done before.

Aren Testing. 1, 2, 3. Hello, testing. Say something. Two, three...

4th Graders Hello!

Aren This is Mrs. Matsuda's 4th grade class. I'm looking at a room full of 10-year-olds, deemed Generation Alpha—or, to some, Baby Zoomers. Just about all of these students are Adventist. And, so you know, I've been a youth pastor for 13 years. I've been a children's pastor for none.

Aren So what we're gonna do is I'm gonna ask you all a few questions about church, and then you'll raise your hand if you have an answer. And if you don't have an answer, you don't have to give an answer. Is that okay? Alright.

First, can anybody raise their hand and tell me what's your favorite thing about going to church?

Girl 1 Children's story.

Boy 1 Getting to learn about God.

Girl 2 Having the pastors tell us new things about Jesus.

Boy 2 I like going to church on Saturday so I can just sleep in on Sunday.

Girl 3 The community.

Boy 3 I like seeing my friends and playing with them after church.

Aren Me too.

Boy 4 Meeting new people.

Aren Ohh, you like meeting new people? Yes? Do you like meeting new people?

Boy 4 Yeah.

Aren Can somebody tell me, now you're really gonna have to think 4th grade, a really good memory at church?

Girl 4 I was at church and I got to sing with my aunt.

Girl 5 One time we went to church and there was a petting zoo.

Boy 1 When I was younger, whenever my parents were singing, I always like, walked up on stage and sung with them.

Aren Were you scared to do that?

Boy 1 When I was younger, not really. Now I am now.

Girl 1 I liked when they had cupcakes for holiday.

Boy 3 I remember one time when I was just about to sit down in my seat, and I saw Chloe. She's my best friend, so.

Aren Do you remember that Chloe?

Girl 6 No.

Aren What is one change you would make to make the Church better?

Boy 5 Free dress. No uncomfortable shoes and no uncomfortable loafers or tight button shirts and belts and khakis. I don't like wearing that.

[SCATTERED APPLAUSE]

Aren Wow, we have some applause. So then let me ask you young man, what would you wear at church then instead?

Boy 5 Shorts and a regular t-shirt.

Girl 7 A longer Sabbath school.

Aren How long would you want Sabbath school to be?

Girl 7 Like an hour long.

Girl 1 I would make the songs be a little quieter.

Girl 8 Have like two pastors collaborate and make a bigger church so more people could go to the church that some are small.

Aren Ohh. Well, pastors love collaborating together. That's a great idea. Yeah?

Boy 3 I'd change it so that there were more potlucks and game nights.

Boy 6 Not everybody might agree with me, but make everything longer.

Aren What do you mean by that?

Boy 6 Like, the duration of time.

Aren Okay, good. Yeah?

Girl 9 Offering.

Aren What about offering?

Girl 9 Like, money.

Girl 4 It's probably just me, but sometimes I don't really understand like what people are saying and stuff like that.

Aren Do you mean like the pastor talking on stage?

Girl 4 Yeah.

Aren What do you think we could do to make it better?

Girl 4 I don't know exactly but like, just like have things that's a little more like conversation. Kind of like that.

Aren That's a really good answer. Thank you for that. Yeah?

Girl 10 Less fancy words.

Aren Anybody else? If you could change one thing about church and you have the power to do it, what's one change you would make?

Girl 11 Like, instead of sitting on like, chairs and stuff like that, like something a little more comfortable maybe.

Aren Like what? What would be more comfortable?

Girl 11 Maybe like, just like a bench kind of with, like a back seat, so like you can like sit down and kind of watch and stuff like that.

Aren Have you sat on a church pew before? Do you know what that is? It's pretty cool. Yeah?

Boy 7 The exact same, but a bit better.

Aren Better how?

Boy 7 Like people are more nice to each other. Like, better than they are now.

Aren Do you think that sometimes church people aren't as nice as they should be?

Boy 7 Yeah. Some people like, fight over Jesus. Like what their beliefs and they, so.

Aren Do you agree with what he's saying, that sometimes church people can be should be nicer?

4th Graders Yes.

Aren Yeah, I think that's true. Sometimes we all can be a lot nicer, huh?

Aren I'm gonna actually do one more quick question. So, if you were to talk to the people who are in charge of the Church and they said, "I want to hear what the 4th graders have to say." What's one thing you would want to say to them?

Girl 12 You're a great pastor.

Boy 8 Good job.

Girl 5 I'm glad we have churches.

Girl 13 You've done good with your life.

Girl 14 You're doing great.

Boy 9 The best job is a pastor.

Aren Wow.

Boy 10 You've made a good church.

Boy 3 Can we please have more game nights and potlucks?

[LAUGHTER]

Aren That's good. That's good. Last question, what's your favorite thing about Mrs. Matsuda?

4th Graders Everything!

Aren Everything! Wow. She's pretty great isn't she?

Boy 11 She's the best teacher in the world...

Denine I really want to thank you for that opportunity because I think that was a conversation that was unique and it really gave me some insight. So it was a gift to me what you what you did with my students that day.

Aren As you got to listen and observe, as I was asking them all of these funny questions, was there anything that stood out to you about their answers?

Denine I did have a lot of surprises. You asked them what they love about church and we spend so much time in the different generations worried about like music style. I thought that was important to them. But what I kept hearing over and over was I like friends. I like going to see my friends. I like playing after church. And it reminded me of the trees that we have at our church. You know, where the kids are climbing the trees and playing. Like, that's huge. But they just kept talking about friends. The things that I expected them to have as a priority really weren't.

I remember Bryce, he raised his hand and he said, "This might come as a surprise, but I wish church were longer." I will never forget that.

Aren Yeah, I have to be honest, when I heard him say he wishes church was longer, that's not something as a pastor I've heard very many times in my life. And it took me by surprise.

Denine They never fail to surprise me. Every day.

Aren I asked them what they would want to change about the Church. And the majority of their answers were things like, you know, wearing more comfortable clothes. Or more food to eat, more games, just kind of lighthearted things like that, right?

Denine Isaac specifically spoke about his clothing. I think he even made mentioned his shoes. [LAUGHS] That was so funny.

Wasn't it interesting that there was no mention of "I wish the worship style would change." That is not on their radar. These kids love church. What happens?

It scares me, frankly, because these kids want to go to church. They love going to church, and I don't know that I see that so much in, as they grow.

Aren It was towards the end, I think it was a young boy. He said, "We need to be nicer because sometimes people fight over Jesus."

Denine They see it all. They hear it at Sabbath lunch, they hear it as they're in the car driving home. They see and hear it all. And that's not just in the church, that's in the school. It's everywhere. They're everywhere, and they're always listening. It's exhausting.

Aren [LAUGHS]

What has teaching children taught you about God, religion, and especially the Church?

Denine You know, we have chapel every Friday. And we have a variety of speakers coming in, pastors and community people. And, you know, we have some who give a really more calm, mellow presentation, and we have others that just work them up into a frenzy. And I can't stand those. They, like the kids are just out of control. And then we have to go back into class and it's just exhausting for me.

And I remember last year we were walking back to the classroom after chapel and I was just feeling like, oh, that was miserable. And Mateo looked at me, I

hadn't said a word, and he goes, "That was the best chapel ever!" I will never forget that.

And it reminds me of something I learned several years ago: What is the difference between a great teacher and an average teacher? And an average teacher uses the same strategies over and over, thereby reaching the same students over and over. But a great teacher changes strategies, thereby reaching everyone over the course of a year. And I've learned that from my students.

Aren What would be your advice to church leaders on how we can make sure to help children, help 10-year-olds feel valued by the church?

Denine I don't know if I have advice for the Church, but I have advice for me. I have made so many mistakes as a teacher and as a parent, and I think it's really important how we talk to children, the things that we say.

I can think of an example. So many. Like I remember my daughter, we she was in academy. This still haunts me. And she painted her nails a very dark color of nail polish. And remember, I grew up in the generation where dark nail polish was somehow not good. What in the world? But that was my reality.

And they were having a choir performance at church, and she wanted her nails to be pretty she got a color that matched her choir gown beautifully because she had a banquet the next day and she wanted her nails to be pretty. And Aren, I asked her—she spent I don't know how long fixing her nails. And I asked her to remove her nail polish and we had a conversation. "But I just spent so much time—" And she did it. She honored me. But things like that haunt me.

And those are the things I know that I said and did wrong. How many things do I not know that I said and did wrong? And we need to be careful about what we say and do to kids because something is happening between

childhood and adulthood. What is that thing, and could it be not so much the messages from the pulpit, but how we're treating young people?

Aren You know, it's been interesting these conversations that I've been having with these young adults for this project. And it seems to me that young people want to give the Church another chance, another chance, another chance, even if they were told to take the nail polish off, for as many times as necessary because they want to be part of it. Inside of each of us is still the 10-year-old child who wants to be at church because they want to play with their friends and the tree right.

Denine It just looks different. It may not be a tree anymore. Maybe it's...

Aren Going to coffee.

Denine Okay, that's what I was thinking of. Exactly. Going to coffee is now playing in the tree and that needs to be encouraged. And when I see kids coming to church holding a coffee cup, I need to say that looks like a great cup of coffee.

Aren That's a nice tree branch.

Denine [LAUGHS] That's a nice tree branch. That's a great tree branch you're playing on. So glad you're here to do it.

Aren Well, thank you so much for allowing me to talk to your students.

Thanks for letting me talk with you today, Mrs. Matsuda. I really appreciate the time.

Denine I appreciate it because I learned so much from them that day. So, thank you. It was a gift that I'll always remember. Thank you, Pastor Rennacker.

Aren Thank you to Denine Matsuda, and her amazing 4th grade class.

There was one last person I wanted to interview, a man named Keith. Keith was an elder at the first church I pastored at and became a mentor to me. We don't talk as often now, but he began messaging me after each *Dear Church* episode, saying how much the stories were impacting him.

Keith What's up, brother?

Aren Keith is a third generation Adventist. He grew up in the DC/Maryland area, went to an Adventist school up until college—and then took a break. It wasn't until he met his wife, who wasn't Adventist but started going to church herself, that he returned. Since then, he's been an active leader. They also have two young adult sons.

Keith I grew up loving the Church, hating the Church, coming back to the Church, and loving it again.

Aren How would you say Keith, you've seen your boys' Adventist experience differ from the Adventist experience you had growing up as a young man?

Keith I wish it was more different. When I see them talk about some of the things I talked about in terms of the strictness of the Church, I thought we were different. Or maybe they just didn't know what real strict Adventism was. But I do think that they a lot less understanding of the doctrine and a lot more understanding of Jesus' love for them. And that was something that I don't know if I picked up on growing up as much as I should have.

Aren If a parent were to ask you what did you do to, for lack of a better term, keep your kids in the Church? How would you answer that? Why is it that

your kids are still in the Church, and what would be your word of guidance to the parents who asked how you did it?

Keith Yeah, I think that we, to be clear, as you know, as you get older and even anytime you have kids, you want them to have a good life and you want them to be close to Jesus. And so it's a constant worry. But I don't, I think maybe the difference is I didn't, we don't put that on them. They don't, you know, they're free to find it of themselves.

I tell my younger son, you have to find your own God. You can't use dad's God. It was okay as a child, but it's important for you to find your own God that you can connect with when your parents are older, maybe gone one day.

Aren Can you unpack that a little bit more? When you say find your own God, what do you actually mean when you tell your son that?

Keith I think it's find your own connection with Jesus. Because it's individual and it took me a long time to find my own connection and have my heart open to Jesus in my own personal way. And when you're young, you rely on your parents' perception of God. You know, you pray like your parents, you pray like your pastor, you pray like other people, you connect as you think you should. As opposed to this is heart business, not mind business, and being able to find that connection in your own way in good and bad is important as you get older.

Aren You know, the dichotomy of, as you put it, heart business and mind business, it's often the hinge that decides whether somebody continues. The Church can often be presented as mind business purely and young people often realize that the core of God, if there is one, has to be love and not knowledge. And they want something that's more heart oriented and if we could realize the place—because there is a place for information and knowledge—the correct place for that, as well as the correct place for

understanding relationship, connection, and the heart business, I think that people would have a much healthier view of Christ.

Keith Yeah, 100%. And I'm even learning it myself. As I said, I'm old. But, you know, as I grow closer in my walk with Jesus, then I become more interested in what he has to say.

Aren Let me now go from your role as a father maybe to your role as somebody's been a leader in the Church, and maybe still as a father, but from your purview and your history and involvement, why do you think our young adults are leaving and what do you think should be done about it?

Keith It's been a worry of mine, or concern of mine, for years, in terms of the institution itself. And it's not the question you asked me, but this is the way I think about it now. I just listened and listening to the *Dear Church* podcast and it's been eye opening to me in realizing that maybe they are leaving the Church—but listening to these young people, first of all, I learned maybe we should listen a little bit more. A lot more because I didn't know that they had such a voice. And they do want to come back, they do want to be part of it. And so why don't we just give them the freedom and movement to allow them to be wherever they are and be able to experience it however they are. And then it'll all work out. It'll all work out.

If we say you have to be this type of person to be in church or that type of person to be in church. If we treat—it's really interesting, you said if we treat the youth like one thing, then we're missing on all of the different parts of young people and people in general. Each one of them has their own story. And so why don't we just meet them where they are and let them be while, you know, if they don't want to be there for this week or this month or this year, that's okay.

One of the things that I remember growing up was when I stopped coming to church, and it's kind of a trope, but when you would come back into church, some sister would say, "Oh, where have you been?" Or, "Oh wow, look who's coming to church." And that's not, I learned that's not helpful, it wasn't helpful for me. It made me feel I don't want to go see that again, but someone who could just say it's so good to see you.

Aren My last question for you, Keith, and I so appreciate the time you're giving. If there's a young adult listening right now who feels just kind of done with the Adventist Church or at least frustrated with the Adventist Church, but it was what they were brought up in. They have fond memories, but they also carry pain. And they're not sure whether to keep attending the Adventist Church or stay Adventist or Christian. What would you say to that young adult?

Keith First of all, one thing again, listening to what I heard would have been hearing is that to let them know, to let them know that you heard and it's okay. That there are people that you can reach out to that will listen and just sit with you. That at the end of the day, the community that you were part of is still a good community and that there are people that you can find who would like minded in this community. You know, you don't have to just be doing the same things that your parents were doing. Find your space in this community, and I know you can.

I'd also say, and make sure, the thing that's crossing my mind is that if we allow you as a young person to come back in the Church, the future is so bright. I'm just listening to the people who've been talking. I've been worried about the Church. But listening to that, I'm not worried about where we are today and where we're going to be because we just let people who are struggling or people who are not in the Church today, just let them come when they want to come, I know we're going to be doing well.

Yeah. I was kind of mad at you this morning, because is it Kara? What's her name?

Aren Oh, Carla?

Keith Carla. I had to go to work at 6:00 this morning and I pulled into the driveway at work and I'm just bawling.

Aren [LAUGHS]

Keith I'm just crying. It is just, and it wasn't sadness. What a powerful young lady that is. What a powerful young lady. That's it. So, so keep going, man. Keep going.

Aren From the start, the plan has been for *Dear Church* to be a limited series of ten episodes, sharing eight young adult stories. And thankfully, we've been able to do that. But I would be lying if I didn't say that the responses we've received these past ten weeks hasn't made me wonder if there should be plans for more.

Not because this show is particularly good, or groundbreaking, or couldn't be done better by others. But because I think it's only become more clear that when young voices are elevated, it makes the Church better for all of us. Even those who feel they're no longer a part of it.

There's this quote I once read, it used to be on the official Church website, that said, "The Seventh-day Adventist Church began like a Silicon Valley start-up—led by young people with vision and passion for a cause who made a significant impact on the developing SDA Church while still teenagers and young adults, transforming the denomination into what it is today."

When I hear the words of Kelly, Sebastian, Carla, Ezrica, and Anthony, Jenn, Pedro, Abel—and the many other young people I've spoken with—I wonder if that quote

remains true. That young people, with vision and passion, are still transforming our Church into what it is today. And that our job is to come alongside of them, listening and sharing together, to join them in that work.

And maybe that will mean future *Dear Church* episodes, but maybe the point is that the show now continues with you. What can you do to help our Church listen better? To share the microphone, to hear other's stories, and to make Adventism a place every person and every generation feels that they are a beloved member of a bigger family.

If this show has been a small part of that mission, I want to say thank you. I look forward to hearing the next story.

Sincerely,
Aren

...

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 is courtesy of Blue Dot Sessions. Cover art by Taji Saleem.

Thank you to all of our guests featured today: Claudette, Keith, Mrs. Matsuda and her 4th grade class, and a special thanks to my wife, Paige, for being the best partner throughout this project. I'm a really lucky husband.

To find every *Dear Church* episode and official episode transcripts, as well as upcoming episode discussion guides, visit our website, seccyouth.com/dearchurch. And we'll still take those ratings and reviews if you haven't left one yet.

Okay, I think that's it. Thank you everyone so much for listening.