When Faith Hurts:
Religious Trauma, Spiritual Injury, and Healing in the Adventist Context

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Introduction: Naming the Wound

Unlike in the past, the word *trauma* is now commonly used in our society. While this marks a welcome shift in public awareness, its growing ubiquity can also obscure its meaning. Jayne McConnaughey (2022) notes the importance of distinguishing between everyday distressing events, those that most people can leave behind, and trauma that results in "long-lasting, debilitating effects" (p. 14). Understanding this distinction requires close attention to how the body processes and stores overwhelming experiences, how people interpret those experiences, and whether they have the internal and external support to metabolize them. "No human can escape this life without experiencing some form of trauma," McConnaughey observes, "but trauma without appropriate help leads to unimaginable suffering for many" (p. 15). In particular, trauma incurred during early development or under conditions of chronic threat often leads to what is now recognized as Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), a condition that quietly shapes identity, relationships, and embodiment.

What distinguishes trauma from other psychological afflictions is not only the severity of the experience but its capacity to rupture core human capacities for trust, identity, embodiment, and safety. In the context of religion, trauma strikes at the heart of one's moral and existential framework. When inflicted by those invoking divine authority, such wounds do not merely hurt—they disorient the self, confuse the experience of God, and often fragment the capacity to belong. McBride (2025) notes that one reason religious trauma often remains unacknowledged is because "what we experience growing up almost always feels 'normal'… even if it is not true" (p. 97). Many individuals emerge from religious environments having been shamed for questioning, punished for nonconformity, and taught that they are fundamentally broken or unworthy—leaving them spiritually and psychologically disfigured, often without language to name what has happened to them.

Religious trauma refers to the emotional, psychological, and spiritual distress that arises from harmful experiences within a religious context. Often rooted in environments of high control, authoritarianism, and rigid belief systems, religious trauma can involve abuse—emotional, sexual, spiritual—as well as manipulation, exclusion, or coercive theology. It may be masked by devotional language, intensified by community silence, and justified in the name of God. While religious trauma has historically been associated with fringe cults or extreme sectarianism, awareness of its presence in mainstream religious communities is growing. As Michelle Panchuk (2024) observes, "A few decades ago, the term 'religious trauma' would have conjured images of obscure, but sensational, accounts of religious cults… [However, today] awareness of the physical, psychological, and spiritual harm that can be inflicted even in mainstream religious contexts has reached an all-time high" (p. 1).

I (Petr) know this tension personally. My mother, diagnosed with dementia eight years ago, never in her life recalled the first eleven years of her childhood—years marked by the death of her mother shortly after childbirth, and the forced caretaking of a newborn sibling at the age of eleven. When I recently visited her three years younger brother and inquired about the years she does not remember, I learned that their father, my grandfather had returned from six years of military service in World War II (on the German side), exhibiting signs now recognizable as untreated PTSD. It was in this traumatic environment when my mom was conceived. At that time he also destroyed all the evidence of being part of SS, and moved to the country of his predecessors (Czechia), where his wife and children soon joined. After returning from the war, he joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church, affiliating with its ultraconservative wing. My non-Adventist uncle also told me that his mom never converted. Family dynamics were deeply affected by this spiritual and emotional rift. One night, following a physical beating from her husband, my grandmother left the house on foot, poorly dressed, and walked several miles through the night to find refuge in the home of an Adventist family. She died for a cancer not long after. While no one in our family used the word *trauma*, the signs have been unmistakable.

Despite all of this, my mother's faith in her adolescent years was real and resilient. My father, who later became a pastor, told me it was her deep trust in God that drew him to her most. Despite carrying untended psychological wounds, she embodied grace and inner strength. But even with a sincere personal spirituality, the legacy of unacknowledged trauma remained—and was passed down, subtly but powerfully, across generations.

This paradox—of faith as both a source of harm and a source of healing—lies at the center of what Hillary McBride (2025) calls "spiritual wounds." She writes: "When for any reason… experience of love, of safety, of presence, of comfort isn't there, we pick up a wound. And that wound is spiritual... It's a wound that cuts at those deepest core needs of belonging, of being known, of understanding our purpose—that we matter, that we are valued" (p. 115). While spirituality can be a powerful resource for healing from trauma, McBride continues, "religious and spiritual practices and communities can also… worsen symptoms of mental health issues" (p. 199). In truth, "all trauma is probably spiritual trauma on some level" (p. 115).

Let's turn toward one such story, still unfolding. It is a story that illustrates how trauma can be encoded in religious spaces—and how, even decades later, healing may begin when pain is finally named.

Alena grew up in a "double world": a home immersed in prayer, scripture, and religious performance, yet behind closed doors marked by shouting, violence, and severe punishment. At the center of her childhood was sexual abuse by a trusted church member, a man respected in the congregation who repeatedly molested her between the ages of three and seven. These acts were not isolated. They occurred in plain sight—during social events, in homes, even in pews—yet no one intervened. Alena internalized the belief that she was invisible, her suffering inconsequential. Only later did she discover that she was not the abuser's only victim; several other girls in the congregation had suffered at his hands.

Religion in her home became both the language of control and the only available lifeline. Her mother used faith to justify punishments and maintain a public image of virtue, while privately

wielding shame and condemnation. Yet, for Alena, prayer was not merely ritual—it became a survival instinct, a wordless cry to God when no one else would listen. This paradox—that the very religion that empowered her abuser also sustained her faith—left deep theological and psychological dissonance.

The trauma Alena endured in childhood—marked by physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse—had pervasive and enduring consequences throughout her adult life. Psychologically, she carried chronic fear, distrust, and a fractured sense of self. Her three marriages repeatedly mirrored the dynamics of her abusive upbringing. Drawn to partners who were controlling or violent, she relived cycles of rejection and shame. Emotionally, she struggled with deep loneliness, suppressed pain, and had persistent feelings of unworthiness.

Spiritually, Alena's early exposure to religion intertwined with violence left her faith conflicted and fearful. For years she rejected organized religion, associating it with hypocrisy and punishment, yet she retained an inner longing for God. This paradox of faith—as both the source of her deepest wounds and her means of survival—defined much of her spiritual journey.

Physically, decades of accumulated trauma manifested in chronic pain, injury, and illness. Repeated violence left her body scarred and frail; stress, malnutrition, and exhaustion eventually led to collapse and life-threatening illness. In every dimension—mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual—Alena's adult life bore witness to the enduring reach of trauma that began in a religiously abusive home.

Mapping the Landscape: A Quantitative Glimpse into Ex-Adventist Experiences

After hearing Alena's story, some might wonder: how common is such an experience? Is hers an isolated case, or does it reflect a broader pattern among those who leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

To begin answering that question, we turn to a recent quantitative study conducted in 2023 by Thomas Arcaro and Duane McClearn of Elon University. This large-scale survey gathered over 1,000 responses from individuals who had disaffiliated from Adventism, offering rare insight into the internal and external dynamics of religious departure. What makes the dataset particularly compelling is the depth of connection respondents had to the Adventist faith:

- 86% were born into Adventist families.
- 73% attended Adventist elementary schools.
- 69% attended Adventist secondary schools.
- 67% studied at an Adventist college or university.
- 49% worked for an Adventist institution.
- 15% served as student missionaries.
- 14% were pastors' children, and 9% were children of missionaries.

These figures reveal that most respondents were not peripheral or nominal adherents. Rather, they were deeply embedded in the institutional, cultural, and spiritual life of the church. Their departure, then, was not a superficial exit from the margins, but a profound unraveling of identities forged over decades within the Adventist system.

The survey also reveals that for a majority, leaving Adventism was neither simple nor sudden. An overwhelming majority (71%) of respondents reported that the process of leaving was difficult—anything but impulsive or casual. Many described it as a prolonged and painful separation marked by fear and uncertainty:

- 36% feared being shunned by family.
- 31% feared the unknown.
- 26% feared losing friends.
- 25% feared the loss of key relationships.

These fears were not hypothetical. A substantial number reported experiencing pressure to remain in the church:

- 37% from family.
- 20% from church members.
- 15% from church leaders.

These findings suggest that religious disaffiliation is not merely a matter of theological disagreement or personal drift. It is often a relational rupture and existential crisis—a process that carries immense psychological and social cost. Scholars increasingly recognize these experiences as forms of *Adverse Religious Experience* (ARE), which may or may not rise to the level of diagnosable trauma but nonetheless inflict deep emotional harm (Anderson 2023, p. 62).

Indeed, many survey participants reported symptoms consistent with religiously induced trauma. While 62.6% expressed significant anger—a hallmark of ARE—others described symptoms that align with what psychologists and pastoral theologians identify as indicators of spiritual or religious trauma:

- 53.7% reported depression or anxiety.
- 38.6% self-identified with PTSD, C-PTSD, or trauma.
- 32.6% described struggles with body image.
- 28.7% reported difficulty with intimacy.
- 22% disclosed acting out sexually.
- 17.2% identified eating disorders.
- 13% reported substance addiction.
- 9% indicated struggles related to gender identity.

Taken together, these data points sketch a sobering picture. For many, religious exit was not merely a cognitive shift but a process of spiritual injury—an unraveling of selfhood marked by fear, loss, and unprocessed harm. The language of trauma is not metaphorical here; it reflects lived physiological, emotional, and relational symptoms that persist long after formal disaffiliation.

It is important to note that *Adverse Religious Experience* does not automatically entail spiritual trauma (Anderson 2023, p. 72). Not every distressing faith-related episode results in trauma in the clinical sense. However, the survey findings reveal significant overlap: many respondents did

not merely leave the church; they left with wounds—some visible, many hidden. For those raised in tightly bound religious systems, where belonging is conditioned on belief and behavior, separation often entails grief, shame, and profound existential loss.

In the next section, we will turn to the open-ended survey responses. Note, we identify the anonymous comments by gender, generation, and whether they self-identified as having trauma or not. The survey consists of 55% female; 40% male; and 4% non-binary responses. The survey responses were made 4% by the Silent generation; 25% by the Baby Boom generation; 25% by Generation X; 36% by the Millennial generation; and 9% by Generation Z. As noted above, 39% of respondents self-identified with PTSD, complex PTSD, and/or trauma. However, the comments indicate symptoms of trauma among some who did not self-identify with trauma.

Unveiling Spiritual Trauma: Survey Findings and Theoretical Insights

Karen Roudkovski (2024) defines spiritual abuse as a "misuse of power in a spiritual context in which a person or group uses various coercive and manipulative methods of controlling the victim, resulting in the abused individual experiencing spiritual, emotional/psychological, physical, or relational harm" (p. 15). She notes that "while all religious abuse may be considered spiritual abuse, not all spiritual abuse is religious" (p. 25).

Religious trauma manifests in a wide array of psychological, physical, social and spiritual symptoms. Unlike other psychological conditions, it operates at the intersection of spiritual authority, emotional harm, and existential identity. As Gabor Maté (2022) explains, "Trauma is not about what happens to you, but what happens inside you" (p. 20). Religious trauma develops when spiritual teachings, leaders, or communities cause emotional or psychological injury, and justify it in the name of God. Panchuk (2024) notes that religious trauma is increasingly recognized not only in fringe or cultic contexts but also in mainstream religious communities, where manipulation, exclusion, and coercive theology may leave deep scars.

While "spiritual abuse is an interpersonal experience between two people. . . religious trauma is a systemic experience between a person and their religion as a whole" (Therapist.com 2025; see Bernock). Trauma is distinct from depression or anxiety alone. Trauma is more than an adverse religious experience. Its symptoms include toxic shame, spiritual dissociation, identity fragmentation, and physiological hyperarousal (Mc Chesney 2025; McBride 2025; Freedman 2025; van der Kolk 2015). Such injuries (often hidden behind theological language) undermine a person's ability to feel safe, worthy, or connected. In this way, trauma distorts one's very sense of self and reality, especially when religious authority was the source of the wound.

Findings: Manifestations of Spiritual Injury and Religious Trauma

Analysis of selected open-ended survey comments reveals that for many ex-Adventist respondents, trauma was both a *precipitating cause* of disaffiliation and a *lingering symptom* after leaving (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment 2014). These patterns are consistent with religious trauma syndrome (Panchuk, 2024), spiritual injury (McChesney, 2025), and what Anderson (2023) terms disembodiment. Seven primary trauma symptom domains emerged. These included abuse and betrayal trauma, sexual shame and intimacy problems, fear

and hypervigilance, shame and guilt, emotional dysregulation and depression, identity and relational rupture, and institutional betrayal.

Abuse and Betrayal Trauma

Some participants reported experiences of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse occurring within Adventist families or institutional settings, sometimes perpetrated by authority figures and later minimized or covered up. These violations of sacred trust exemplify *betrayal trauma*, in which those charged with protection become the source of harm (Hord & Hord, 2025; see Langberg, 2024).

The survey data reveal that 32% of the respondents recalled being psychologically abused by an Adventist leader, while 35% shared that a church member had psychologically abused them. When asked about sexual abuse, 6% stated that an Adventist leader had sexually abused them, and a church member had sexually abused 10%.

One respondent wrote, *"I was raped and sexually abused by my pastors and elders from when I was ten years old. I had to leave to survive"* (Female, Millennial, trauma). Another recalled, "*I'd been sexually assaulted as a child (8 years old), by the much older (teenager) son of a long-standing church member. He was caught in the act, literally, and while my parents lobbied the church and school officials, NOTHING was ever done. In fact my father's job was threatened if he didn't back off and 'let the church handle it.*'" (Female, Gen X). A third added, *"In my twenties I pierced my ears as an adult and was physically assaulted for it"* (Female, Millennial, trauma). These accounts illustrate systemic failures to protect victims and the confusion created when divine authority is conflated with human abuse of power.

Sexual Shame and Intimacy Dysfunctions

Professionals report that "trauma can severely a person's sexual self . . . often causing tension, pain, and emotional numbness" (Bay Area CBT Center 2024). Religious trauma connects to sexual shame and intimacy dysfunctions in various forms, such as sexual anxiety, a lack of desire, pain during intercourse, difficulty with arousal and orgasm, and feelings of shame or guilt about one's body, desires, or sexual responses.

29% respondents self-reported struggling with intimacy. 22% reported acting out sexually, whether by promiscuity, sexual infidelity, high-risk sexual encounters, excessive consumption of pornography, or other forms.

Consider the following statements across generations to see the depth of the issue. Female Baby Boomer states: *"The demands of perfection were over the top and the stress of never measuring up to the requirements was a constant struggle. Jesus would not Love us if we were bad children and worse when we were adults"* (Female, Boomer, trauma); female from the next generation recalls: *"The need to be perfect, raised that sex was taboo and had to sneak just to hug or kiss your boyfriend....made public displays of affection hard, even kissing my husband at our wedding"* (Female, Gen X, trauma).

The following two comments are from Millennials: *"Emotional infidelity was an issue mostly in setting of Adventist relationships*" (Female, Millennial, trauma); "*I always thought being a lesbian was wrong and I would pray that God would heal me, and I thought he did, but here we are lol I blame my upbringing for not loving authentic self more. I also think maybe that's the reason I was starved of sexual needs which is why I was heavily addicted to porn"* (Non-binary, Millennial); and the last comment from Gen Z: *"Struggling with intimacy 100%. You're taught not to be a sexual person and truth remains pure, but then suddenly, when you're married, that's supposed to flip on its head and you're suddenly supposed to be a sexual person that can f**k people up so much"* (Female, GenZ, trauma).

Along the same line go body image issues (reported by 33% of respondents), which go along with struggling with eating disorders (reported by 17% of respondents). A few examples of this type of comments across generations include: *"This causes depression/anxiety when you don't live up to their standards; which causes emotional eating, which perpetuates the whole process to continue"* (Female, Boomer); or *"Growing up with teachers who made fun of you for eating meat, or liking things, teachers and people telling you that you shouldn't go to public school with the philistines, that associating with non-adventists could corrupt you, constantly fearing you will be caught breaking an Adventist rule and being judged or talked about."* (Female, Gen X, trauma); or *"Still struggle with body image at times. Emotional infidelity was an issue mostly in setting of Adventist relationships*" (female, Millennial, trauma); *"Growing up, your talked to me modest and everybody thought I had body image issues. Now that I'm 23 I don't know my own body. I'm not sure how to explain that other than I'm not comfortable in my skin. I have struggled with an eating disorder, because growing up so many of the women in the church believe that if they're too overweight, God doesn't love them. I've noticed that a lot of people in church have so many food things going on with them that's just not healthy"* (Female, GenZ, trauma).

Fear and Hypervigilance

Other participants described persistent anxiety connected to Adventist eschatology, moral perfectionism, and conditional belonging. Fear of divine punishment, persecution, and social rejection persisted long after disaffiliation, consistent with the *hyper-arousal* symptoms characteristic of trauma disorders (Panchuk, 2024).

Respondents recalled, *"the end-times prophecies and judgment day and the Sunday law and the foretold persecution haunted me every day. My anxiety was through the roof"* (Female, Gen Z, trauma); *"It was terrifying in the beginning—I understand now it's because my entire identity was Adventism"* (Female, Millennial, trauma); and *"I started to have crippling anxiety over natural disasters wtc and sought counselling. That was when I really started to deconstruct al of the destructive beliefs I had been taught."* (Female, Millennial), or someone else saying "*when I hear certain stuff that is happening in the world that looks like it fulfills prophecy I am in full panic mode"* (Female, Millennial). These testimonies reveal how theological fear can be internalized somatically, shaping lifelong patterns of vigilance and dread.

Shame and Guilt

Shame was a dominant affective residue across narratives. Respondents reported deep guilt surrounding sexuality, food, dress, and even emotional expression—evidence of internalized behavioral regulation that extended beyond belief. McBride (2021) interprets such patterns as *disembodiment*, where moral surveillance severs people from their own bodily intuition and desire.

As one participant explained, *"I still can't eat unclean meat without feeling extreme guilt. I also felt shame about having sex for a very long time"* (Female, Gen Z, trauma). Another confessed, *"I grappled with leaving for close for 8 years. It was then I realized that I was attempting suicide regularly because of the stress and pressure Adventism put on me, that truly made me realize I couldn't do it anymore and survive. I've always been bisexual and attempted [suicide] because I was so horrified by that part of myself.*" (Female, Millennial, trauma), while a third reflected, *"the pastor preached publicly on multiple occasions about the dangers of masturbation, even in front of families with children… I also felt guilty for a long time for violating their rules"* (Male, Millennial). These narratives highlight the lasting imprint of moral control on the psyche and body.

Emotional Dysregulation and Depression

As noted earlier, 54% of respondents reported having depression and/or anxiety either as Adventist or ex-Adventist. 13% reported to be very angry and resentful towards the Seventh-day Adventist church. Comments of 7% respondents reflected anger, resentment, bitterness, frustration, grief, sadness, or emotional hurt. They experienced profound emotional instability following their exit from the church, oscillating between anger, numbness, and despair. Their language conveys the symptoms of complex post-traumatic stress, rage, hopelessness, and exhaustion (McChesney, 2025; Anderson, 2023).

One participant stated bluntly, *"To say I hate Adventism is not sufficient. I f---ing hate it… It is hurting people and hurting them in the name of Jesus"* (Female, Millennial, trauma). Another wrote, *"I spent so much energy lying and hiding who I was in the past. Substance use and sex were ways that I could feel an element of release and control. I hesitate to call it "struggling," but I definitely have had episodes in my life where my protest to my development and upbringing caused me to "act out" my fantasy of feeling free to be in control of my own life. Yes, the toxic culture of the Seventh-day Adventist Church absolutely fucked me up."* (Male, Millennial, trauma). A third lamented, *"Losing my faith has taken me almost fourteen years to come to terms with"* (Male, Millennial, trauma). Their testimonies reveal how disillusionment with religion can cascade into self-loathing and depressive collapse when meaning structures disintegrate.

Identity and Relational Rupture

Disaffiliation often entailed the erosion of identity and belonging. Participants described estrangement from family, social isolation, and a disorienting loss of self. The trauma here was not only spiritual but relational, as those who left were shunned or rendered invisible.

"It causes me anxiety to be around Adventist family members…. I fear being judged and shunned" (Male, younger). Another explained, *"I lost a big part of my identity and sense of purpose. It was incredibly traumatic"* (Male, Millennial, trauma). One younger woman added, *"My parents still think I'm Adventist… It has just been a lot of confusing navigation in trying to get rid of the shame that was drilled into me and truly figure out what I believe on my own"* (Female, Gen Z, trauma). These accounts exemplify what McBride (2025) calls *attachment rupture*—the relational disconnection that sits at the core of spiritual trauma.

Institutional Betrayal

Finally, respondents voiced deep moral injury regarding institutional hypocrisy and the mishandling of abuse. Clergy manipulation, cover-ups, and silencing of victims were recurrent themes, leading to loss of trust in both leaders and the denomination itself. This issue is well covered by Diane Langberg in her book *When the Church Harms God's People: Becoming Faith Communities That Resist Abuse, Pursue Truth, and Care for the Wounded* (2024).

Here are a few examples from our dataset *"I was threatened, emotionally abused, manipulated* [by my senior pastor and head elder]*"* (Male, Millennial, trauma). *"Having served in a pastoral position… I can no longer attend knowing that most of the piousness is smoke and mirrors"* (Female, Baby Boomer, trauma). *"The SDA Church has as much or more cover-up of criminal abuse as the Catholics and SBC… I've lost all faith in the organization"* (Female, Gen X, trauma). Such testimonies align with theories of *moral injury*, where betrayal by trusted institutions produces enduring cynicism and grief.

Integrative Reflection: When the Sacred Becomes Unsafe

The symptom patterns reflected in this data mirror recognized trauma responses across multiple domains—emotional, somatic, relational, and existential. While younger respondents were more likely to use psychological language (e.g., trauma, PTSD), older respondents often framed their experiences in moral or spiritual terms (loss of faith, disillusionment). Across all ages, however, the underlying experiences were similar: disorientation, fear, betrayal, and grief.

What this suggests is that for many, leaving Adventism was not simply a theological decision—it was the consequence of feeling spiritually unsafe. As McChesney (2025) argues, "Spiritual injury fractures faith, not only in God, but in one's own worthiness, intuition, and capacity to belong" (p. 61). The evidence from this study affirms that religious trauma can and does occur within mainstream, high-demand religious communities when theology, control, and shame become tools of conformity rather than pathways to grace.

Prevention and Healing: Toward a Trauma-Informed Church Culture

While the data in this study reveal a painful reality, they also point to a path forward. Healing from religious trauma cannot be accomplished by individual therapy alone. The literature emphasizes that sustainable recovery requires safe, embodied, and validating community experiences. As McBride (2025) notes, "We might need to create communities specifically

designed around how to best support the folks who are living with trauma. In doing so, we might find we build better and more beautiful communities where we all can heal" (p. 166).

Trauma-informed churches prioritize being present over demanding perfection and safety over control. They do not silence pain with premature theology, nor do they confuse conformity with spiritual growth. Instead, they embody the very compassion, humility, and honesty they seek to preach.

According to McBride (2025), such communities:

- Prioritize psychological and relational safety over behavioral conformity
- Make space for pain without resorting to spiritual bypassing
- Embrace the full complexity of embodied experience and spiritual journeying
- Foster accountability and humility in leadership

This approach also transforms how we relate to children and adolescents. Many young people—whether baptized or not—are already deeply spiritual in their own intuitive way. When fear, guilt, or conditional belonging are used to coerce conversion or control behavior, trauma often takes root. McChesney (2025) and Freedman (2025) warn against practices that retraumatize: shame-based purity culture, rigid hierarchies, and performative religiosity.

Instead, churches must cultivate—where no one holds unchecked authority, where vulnerability is met with compassion, and where the slow work of trust can take root. Attention needs to be paid to developing preventive mechanisms/policies to protect church communities from unhealthy or dysfunctional leaders and/or predators. Local congregations need guidelines on how to cultivate a healthier and safer environment that fosters healing and personal growth.

Conclusion: From Recognition to Repair

Alena's story—marked by the entanglement of religious language with domestic and sexual abuse, by abandonment cloaked in piety, and by long years of spiritual isolation—is tragically not unique. As this article has shown, many ex-Adventists carry similar scars. When trauma and religious formation are intertwined, the result is not only psychological injury but deep spiritual disorientation.

However, Alena's story also offers hope. After years abroad, she fled from a drug addicted husband to her homeland. There she was all alone—emotionally exhausted, without work, without support, in debt, and a small child. It was during this season, about ten years ago that we connected over social media. For the first time, she was able to share her story and wrote several emails with more than a hundred pages of pain, shame, and hopelessness.

We began to talk. And in the midst of that darkness, a longing for God awoke in her again. Not that she had ever completely left him, but now she began to seek him intentionally, longing for healing. Intellectually, she perceived Jesus, but emotionally, she was frozen—her heart was unable to experience love.

A long process began. She even started to attend church, studied the Bible, and joined a small group. But when sincere brothers and sisters started to feel it was a time for her to "stop smoking" to be able to get re-baptized. That pressure eventually triggered a wave of old memories and activated her childhood trauma.

She collapsed… but rose again. Even though she was eventually advised not to attend church anymore, she did not give up. God never let her go. On the contrary, he worked with her, loved her, formed her, and sent people into her path who helped her believe again. Today, the change is visible in her. Slowly but surely, her heart is being healed under the influence of God's love. She is even writing a book about her story.

On October 10, 2025, at SafePoint in Prague, I (Petr) had the privilege of preaching on Colossians 2 and 3—Paul's invitation to root ourselves in Christ, not in guilt, fear, or perfectionism. In that sacred context, I shared Alena's story—not as a case study, but as testimony. Then, amidst of the millennial community, I invited her to come forward and read aloud a letter of apology offered on behalf of the church that had once failed to protect her.

It was not a scripted gesture. There was no institutional strategy, only the presence of a loving church community. That moment became sacred not because it erased the past, but because it dared to name it truthfully, in love. For Alena and for those like her, it became a doorway to reintegration, dignity, and peace. A return not to the church as it was, but to a community re-rooted in Christ.

As scholars increasingly argue, trauma recovery is not achieved through theological debate or doctrinal clarity alone. It is enabled through embodied presence, mutual attunement, and a spirituality grounded in justice, safety, and trust (McBride, 2025; Panchuk, 2024). Religious trauma calls not merely for new beliefs but for new *practices*—practices that honor pain, that protect the vulnerable, and that nurture post-traumatic growth.

In that spirit, this article has sought to hold up a magnifying glass to the invisible suffering behind many ex-Adventist departures. not only to the invisible suffering behind many ex-Adventist departures. May we choose to listen, lament, and reimagine the church not as an institution of control, but as a body of care.

As Paul writes in Colossians, the mystery of God is Christ, and in him, even our deepest wounds can become the soil of healing.

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