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A Powerful Story I Had Been Set Free to Tell*

Lindsey Jorgensen-Skakum.†

O Great Weaver of this grand tapestry, weave our stories together.
O Great Weaver of marvellous mysteries, weave our lives together in you.
You knit me together, you formed me from earth,
the image of God from the day of my birth.
Your Spirit brings life to these dried up and crusty old bones,
through water and Word you claim me as your own.

O Great Weaver of this grand tapestry, weave our stories together.
O Great Weaver of marvellous mysteries, weave our lives together in you.

You stitch us up when we're torn and worn through,
You take our threads and you mend us anew.
And when we feel like we are just hanging on by a thread,
You promise us grace in the wine and the bread.
O Great Weaver of this grand tapestry, weave our stories together.
O Great Weaver of marvellous mysteries, weave our lives together in you. ‡

When I was a teen, I didn't think I had a story worthy of being shared with others. I was a good student, a good athlete, and a good sibling. I was someone who always tried to do the right thing, whether that was with my friends, my family, or within my community. But there was a part of my story I kept hidden away. A part of my story that the world told me wasn't okay.

That part of my story was that I am gay.

Growing up in Southern Alberta in the early 90s, I quickly learned by the way people talked and joked about, even harmed, people in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community that being gay was not something to be proud about—and it was certainly not something that was going to be celebrated by anyone I knew. In fact, I distinctively remember thinking as young as five that if anyone ever found out that I was gay I would never be seen as good, worthy, or loveable by anyone ever again.

I felt this way because when I was a youth our towns and communities were still fighting over whether gay marriage should be legal in Canada. Which meant that often I had to hear what my friends, family, and church thought of people like me. And it wasn't pretty. They would tell homophobic jokes that would make my stomach churn inside, they would

* The author was asked to contribute this piece based on their powerful and historic story-sharing at the 2018 CLAY gathering of 930 Canadian Lutheran and Anglican youth, young adults, and adults who are lay-leaders, diaconal ministers, clergy, and bishops in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) and the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC). To better understand some of the ways that this presentation was “historic,” see the Afterword by guest editor Karen Kuhnert.

† See the Foreword of this issue of *Consensus* for biographical information.

‡ Lyrics to the CLAY 2018 Theme Song, written by Jeremy Langner and Carey J. Buss. Their writing was informed by the “Threads” theme imagery and the event Scriptures which included Psalm 139. Video of the Song being performed: <https://youtu.be/QvjJbOZYhfU>.

make horrific comments while sharing their thoughts on gay people like me, and they loved to bring out their bibles to point to passages they felt told gay people that they weren't right. Back then it felt like the world around me had decided that people like me shouldn't exist. And even though from a very young age I had always heard about God's love, I began to wonder if God could really love someone like me. So I did the only thing I felt I could: I hid my true self away so no one would ever know who I was.

For decades I lived in a constant state of fear that someone, anyone, would find out that I wasn't like the rest of the kids I knew. That someone would figure out I had a crush on that girl from youth group, that I really hated wearing dresses and make-up to church or school, or simply that I wasn't who I was pretending to be. A deep fear that would cause me to hide these important parts of myself away in shame—hoping and praying that no one would ever find out my secret.

Part of the reason behind this feeling was that when I was growing up I didn't personally know any other members of the LGBTQ2S+ community. No one else was really "out" where I lived. And as the years passed, I began to feel like I was the only one who had ever felt this way. Like I was some kind of Gay Lutheran Bigfoot—often spoken about, argued about, even wondered about, but never truly seen. That is, until the day I met Tyson.

Tyson was from a small town in Southern Alberta. He came from a loving, tight-knit family that had attended a Lutheran church. He loved to laugh, he loved to sing, but the best part of all was that he was gay like me. Unlike me, however, he had found a way to embrace his story in a way I never had. He wasn't afraid or ashamed of being gay and Christian. He had simply had enough of hiding his God-given truth from the world—and so he had chosen to embrace it.

Seeing someone reflect for me who I had always longed to be lifted a weight off my chest I can't even fully describe to you. I was no longer that lone Gay Lutheran Bigfoot I had always thought I had been—I was part of a new and growing family of queer Christians. And in that moment I knew two things would always be true: that I would never be alone in how I felt about being gay ever again, and that nothing God had ever created was a mistake.

Tyson and his story were a gift to me. A gift that helped me to start living out the truth of my own story—that I was a beloved child of God, no matter what my sexual orientation or gender identity might have been. This was a truth I heard wash over me again and again through the words of Psalm 139 we have heard throughout this week: a psalm that declares "you search me and know me God—I am fearfully and wonderfully made!" This was the truth that finally set me free. If God had knowingly and lovingly created me, there was no way that anyone could ever take that away.

Through meeting Tyson, I also found a whole community of supportive and loving 2SLGBTQIA+ people, as well as affirming pastors and priests right in my home town. People who took the time to listen to my story and hold it carefully in their hands, all the while affirming that I was a beloved and gifted child of God and that nothing would ever change that. It was the message I had been longing to hear, and with their support I began preparations to come out to my family.

I was a little afraid to come out to my family because a few months before I had gathered them around our kitchen table to tell them something I thought was good news: that I had felt a calling to become a Lutheran pastor. Now, you might think this would have been great news for any parents to hear. In fact, I have heard of some parents giving thanks to God for such an announcement from their child. But that didn't happen for me.

While my grandparents, who had helped build our home congregation, were ecstatic and proud, my parents, who had been attending the same Lutheran church almost all their lives, didn't talk to me for two whole weeks after I told them! So it was with great anxiety that I gathered my parents and sister around our kitchen table once more. But this time I was prepared for whatever might happen.

I had spent the weeks carefully planning out each and every moment of my coming out. I had created a binder of information on being gay and Christian for each of my family members—it had letters from supportive pastors and close friends as well as a letter from me explaining my fears and hopes in telling them. It had theological papers and a DVD they could watch about other Christians with LGBTQ kids. And it even had the information for a support group they could attend if they needed.

I had also arranged to stay with some good family friends that night—people who offered to give me a home until I could figure things out—just in case my parents kicked me out. I had a team of people supporting me and praying for me. And most importantly I had Tyson—who was waiting outside my parent's house that night, acting as my getaway car just in case I needed it.

So as I gathered my family around the kitchen table that night—like I had done months before. I took a deep breath, shoved my fear aside, and said “I have something to tell you—I'm Gay.” I looked around the table as everyone seemed frozen by my revelation. Then, finally, my mother stood and told me to get up from the table. I immediately felt all the blood drain from my face as I was sure she was going to throw me out of our home—but what she did next was totally unexpected. She wrapped me in her arms and said “We love you—we will always love you—you are our Lindsey and that will never change.” *And she* wrapped me in another big hug, rocking me back and forth.

I began to cry, overwhelmed with shock, hope, and joy as I never thought this moment would come. After my mom was assured that I knew that I was loved, my father gave me a hug, then launched into his own loving and affirming “Dad speech”—which sounded more like a quote from a discovery channel documentary because he spent a lot of time talking about Gay penguins.

Lastly, my sister, who had been sitting quietly at the end of the table, rose up and gave me a hug. She had been away at bible school for the year and had spent much of it asking about my gay friend Tyson. I didn't know why she had become so fixated on him, but she confessed that she had felt God telling her she needed to love Gay people, so she had been trying hard to learn as much about Tyson as possible so she could be his friend. But when I came out to her she said it all became clear—God just wanted me to love you and your friends! At this point I was *a crying emotional mess* and I suddenly realized my friend Tyson was still waiting outside for word of that night's events. So I quickly gave my family their informational binders and let them know I had secretly moved out of the house just in case, and had a getaway car waiting for my escape.

And this is my favorite moment of the story, because my mother rose again from the table and said, “Lindsey, if you don't move all your stuff home tonight and invite your friend to come inside for ice cream cake you will be disowned.” I could hear the serious tension in her voice and so in my shocked and excited state I grabbed my shoes and ran from my house to meet Tyson who was waiting parked down the block from my home.

However, In that moment of excitement I didn't think about the optics of the situation or the fact that I had not yet brought Tyson up to speed—so he sees me barreling out of my

home, almost tripping across the lawn, without my shoes or a jacket on, running to his car—and at this point he begins to struggle to start the car, thinking that I have just been thrown out of my family and chased from my home!

When I finally got in the car all I could say was, “They love me—I have to move home!” Which was quite confusing and shocking to him in the moment, but he quickly caught on. He helped me move my worldly possessions back to my parent’s house that night and agreed to come inside to meet my parents, eat ice cream cake, and watch the DVD I had left them about other LGBTQ2S+ kids and families.

That night, as I gathered with my family and Tyson, I realized that I had a story to share after all. A life-changing story of God’s love, acceptance, and grace when I least expected to find it at all. A powerful story that I had been set free to tell when I had taken the risk to listen and hold my friend Tyson’s coming out story. A story that would come to unite both Tyson and me, our families, and our friends in an effort to bring hope to others who had lived in fear and shame of being queer and Christian.

So, Tyson and I began to share our stories of finding love and acceptance whenever we could. And today *as a Queer Lutheran Pastor* I am honored to hold the stories of many people who have walked a similar road, and I am blessed to be able to remind them that their story is a needed and important part of God’s story for us all.

I’m excited to be a part of a church that doesn’t simply welcome people on its sign but that celebrates each and every one of us for who we were fearfully and wonderfully created to be! No matter our gender identity or sexual orientation, our ability or age, our ethnicity or status in this life ... we are all children of God with important stories to tell and so many stories *yet to be heard*.

And what I have learned about sharing and holding other stories throughout my life is that there is an important story behind everything: How a picture got on a wall. How a scar got on your face. Sometimes the stories are simple, and sometimes they are hard and heart-breaking to hear—but every story has an important and celebrated place with us here, because every story has been fearfully and wonderfully made by God for us to share in this place. And it’s my hope and prayer that you have had a chance to have had your stories heard and held today. Thank you for holding mine tonight.

Afterword by guest editor Rev. Karen Kuhnert

For subject matter related to this Afterword see:

- Today’s and Tomorrows, Canadian Luther History web site, <https://canadianlutheranhistory.ca/todays-%26-tomorrows>.
- “Queer(y)ing Labels: Dialogues of Identity.” Volume 42:2 of *Consensus*, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol43/iss2/1>.

“As a Pastor, Lindsey has a passion for sharing the Good News of God’s love within and outside the church’s walls. A passion that has led them to share a ministry of welcome and inclusion as a member of the LGBTQ2S+ community.”

These were the words used in the post-Event synopsis to describe the presentation by Lindsey Jorgensen-Skakum to the 2018 CLAY Gathering. These two sentences capture a few, but not all, of the contexts for the inclusion of this Article in this *Consensus* Issue. I had

the privilege of being present for Pr. Lindsey's live Story-weaving presentation, along with my spouse, one of our children, and our three Youth groups.

In the days around Pastor Lindsey's presentation, we had all been in Large Group Gatherings (LGGs) of 900+ people singing the CLAY 2018 Theme song:

O Great Weaver of this grand tapestry, weave our stories together.

O Great Weaver of marvellous mysteries, weave our lives together in you.

As a person and a parent, as a pastor and a Youth and Young Adult leader, I was awed by Pastor Lindsey's grace-filled presentation of the Good News of God's love. It was a presentation that broke down barriers of difference and lifted up spirits in hope in the midst of fear and distress.

The presentation included, as you just read, Pastor Lindsey's Coming Out story, precious in itself—indeed. And yet there was more. The proclamation addressed the vulnerability humans *feel* when misunderstood, excluded, abused, feeling under threat. And more. It addressed the hurtful *realities* people face in homes, schools, churches, workplaces, and public spaces, and it addressed the *reality* that people not only *feel* misunderstood, excluded, abused, and under threat—but many do face incredible harm in these spaces; they *are* actually unsafe in their life circumstances.

Pastor Lindsey wrote the presentation intentionally naming some of the contexts of their story (Lethbridge, Alberta in the anti-gay 1990s, unsure, if not also vulnerable and at risk at school, in the community, and perhaps even at home), but Pr. Lindsey did so in such a way that listeners could make the connection between Pastor Lindsey's contexts and their own: "When I was a teen, I didn't think I had a story worthy of being shared with others." The weaving of Pastor Lindsey's story, and the listener's story, and God's story, and the realities of these stories in the contexts of "CLAY Thunder Bay" (2018), began to come powerfully together right from that first sentence.

The acronym CLAY stands for Canadian Lutheran Anglican Youth, and it is used as a noun for the national gathering event. CLAY is a "Youth Event," of the kind known worldwide to many Church organizations. It is also the largest *intergenerational* gathering of the most influential leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada. Having a Coming Out story told on such a politically charged stage, to such a large gathering, across a national audience, had not been done before. Caring Conversations about Queerness had been happening institutionally in private—regulated—spaces. This story-sharing was going to be public. The invitation itself was historic. The presentation was historic. This launched a new moment in Public Theology and in Church History.

The two national Churches of Anglicans and Lutherans are in a solid relationship built upon the Waterloo Declaration. But *within* the Churches people in the pews and within the Orders of Ministry are not of one mind on many things. Prejudices exist, and the pain is real. Who gets access to the main stage at any type of gathering is controversial—platforms are powerful.

What's more, this presentation was being given in the midst of the first National CLAY Gathering to be planned after the release of the TRC Calls to Action, meaning within the Churches there were serious cleavages to be considered. The invitation to Pastor Lindsey to be a Story Weaver, along with the invitation to other Story Weavers of complex diversities, involved a lot of risk and a lot of trust on the part of many people and numerous institutional

systems. The Story Weavers also had to prayerfully consider whether they could trust the Church and the Public with their truth. The community of Story Weavers included Elder in Residence Ojibway-speaker Esther Diabo of Whitesand First Nation; writer, actor, and teacher Jenny Salisbury from Toronto; traditional women’s dancer, singer, songwriter, and drummer Beatrice Twance-Hynes; Biigtigong Nishnaabeg; and Barbadian-Canadian Anglican pastor and slam-poetry artist Steve Greene. This was historic.

And finally, among the many heartbreaking contexts of various places and spaces, was the complicated context of having this Christian Youth Gathering taking place where the lands and waters from time immemorial have been the Sacred Territory of the Anishinaabeg, just as Canadians and the Peoples of the First Nations were beginning to understand the “colonialism” and “intergenerational trauma” that had manifest in the specific systemic tragedy of the Seven Fallen Feathers as exposed by Tanya Talaga.

In *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City* Talaga details the deaths of seven Indigenous youth whose bodies were found in the McIntyre River system around Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011. Between time immemorial and 2018, there was colonialism, and Residential Schools, and the Sixties Scoop, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and now the undeniable exposure of persistent systemic racism perpetrated by the Canadian Government and Christians in God’s name. And all of a sudden, at CLAY Thunder Bay, all these terrible realities had faces. Lutherans and Anglicans young and old had their eyes opened to the realization that these systemic abuses are perpetrated *by real people against real people*—now. The reality became real: this is not our past, this is our present—our now. O God!

The CLAY participants had been led through the second-largest KAIROS Blanket Exercise to ever have been done in the world. The Exercise was led by Metis Elders and Elders from Pays Plat Nation and Fort William Nation, most of whom were Residential School Survivors. The Youth experienced the dwindling of joy and vigor as the Blankets were emptied. And then the Survivors, with gentle care, debriefed the Christian Youth with embrace. They gifted these kids of the Church with the compassion they would have wanted to have received in their own pain; they understood deeply. *These* Elders were once teens who were told that they didn’t have a story worthy of being shared with others. And so too, the Fallen Feathers were told that their lives did not matter. Pastor Lindsey, and Esther, and Jenny and Beatrice and Pastor Steve and the Survivors had *all* been told that they didn’t have a story worthy of being shared—but God’s story was that *all* these people and their stories are *beloved*. Local artist Shy-Anne Hovorka sang by drum to the hurting and confused young ones *and* older ones sitting on the banks of Lake Superior. She sang them her song “Only the River Knows.”

Joelle Kidd, an *Anglican Journal* Staff Writer from 2017 to 2021, recalled Hovorka’s words of introduction to the song “Only the River Knows” in this way:

... Hovorka said she had been inspired to write the lyrics from the perspective of one of the deceased teens. “This song is actually from the perspective of one of the fallen feathers, and how he’s trying to communicate with his mother from afar, and how the river actually carried the soul, as he passed, carried him as he made it to the next world,” she said.

Despite ongoing questions about the circumstances surrounding these deaths, Hovorka said, “I think sometimes what we’re forgetting is that it’s not about what happened. It’s about the loss of these lives.”

For Youth Ministers it is always clear that there are too many lives lost. Into *all* of this, Pastor Lindsey shared threads of stories. There were many contexts that the Story Weavers needed to consider as they shared. And the community of Story Weavers was tasked with bringing all these threads-of-stories in contexts—together with the participants—and to set them *all* at the foot of the cross with truth and integrity. Together all the peoples would need to trust the threads into the hands of the Great Weaver of love and life. This was done most memorably. It was powerful. It was historic.

No matter our gender identity or sexual orientation, our ability or age, our ethnicity or status in this life ... we are all children of God with important stories to tell and so many stories yet to be heard.

For more on CLAY 2018 read:

- <https://elcic.ca/2018/08/23/lutheran-anglican-youth-from-across-canada-gather-in-thunder-bay/>
- <https://anglicanjournal.com/youth-hear-the-story-of-the-seven-fallen-feathers-during-clay-public-witness-event/>
- <https://anishinabeknews.ca/2018/08/31/kairos-blanket-exercise-touches-the-heart-of-800-youth/>
- <https://elcic.ca/2018/08/23/lutheran-anglican-youth-from-across-canada-gather-in-thunder-bay/>.

For more on the Special Convention of the ELCIC gathered from June 28 to July 2, 2023, and the passing of the following Motions, read:

- ELCIC addressing Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia. (March 2023) As AMENDED APPROVED, <https://elcic.app.box.com/s/uk6ag0nxj5kasnerxv3bksr8u8egn0ym>
- Resource links at: <https://elcic.ca/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/homophobia-biphobia-and-transphobia/>
- ELCIC information on the use of Pronouns see <https://elcic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/facts-about-pronouns.pdf>
- Inclusive Language Guidelines see <https://elcic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/facts-about-pronouns.pdf>
- ELCIC Addressing Racism, White Supremacy and issues of Racial Injustice. (March 2023). APPROVED, <https://elcic.app.box.com/s/vhuuz3rvw1ufomyy3aboutbwxja3q3or>
- ELCIC Motion relating to Ableism. (March 2023). APPROVED, <https://elcic.app.box.com/s/hxc8vn3bfj6b0bjk95ha2a2hiboy9xa9>
- ELCIC Motion relating to Just Relationship with the Land. (March 2023). APPROVED, See especially Item 10 on pages 19–24 <https://elcic.app.box.com/s/z9gnkt754bbdjuv0nk3ktgmbaxrx2qsl>