

By Lyds Keesmaat-Walsh

ANGLICAN VOICES



ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES

Lyds Keesmaat-Walsh (right) prepares the Eucharist with the Rev. Molly Finlay during the Pride service at Church on Tap, a monthly event at Christ Church Deer Park in Toronto. PHOTO: MICHAEL HUDSON

I'm one of the lucky ones. Most queer Christians' stories are stories of rejection, stories of trauma, stories of being told they're not welcome in the churches they call home. But that was never my story. I'm one of the lucky ones.

I don't remember the first time I found out someone was LGBTQ+ in my church, so many of them were out, and welcomed, and loved, and affirmed before I was even born. I grew up in a congregation that has been blessing and marrying LGBTQ+ couples for as long as they've been able to. I'm one of the lucky ones.

I remember, though, the first time I told someone I

thought I might be queer. I was carpooling with my old priest to the 9 o'clock service. I was deep in the closet about being trans and non-binary and still thought I was a girl. I had just gotten home from a trip to Central America where I'd developed a crush on a female friend of mine. I had no idea what it meant and had no idea what to do. As my priest and I drove, and I told her about my trip, I blurted out, "...and then I realized that I had feelings for her, and I don't know what they mean, and what if I'm gay, and I'm so confused!" My priest was my safe person to talk to, the first one I came out to, my

safe haven in the confusion of coming out to myself. My priest was out herself. I'm one of the lucky ones.

When I first started going by Lyds as a placeholder name until I find one that fits, my parishes and diocese made that transition easy and flawless. When I stood up at "members' time" at my diocesan synod and talked about how there wasn't a bathroom at the venue that I could use, our secretary of synod apologized to me. At the next synod, a gender-neutral bathroom was provided. My parishes and diocese are taking active steps to become more trans-accessible and a safe space for me and the rest of the trans community. I'm one of the lucky ones.

I've been able to preach at, serve at, and have a dance party at Pride services and Pride parties in more than one of my church communities. I've danced to drag queens doing Gospel Drag after listening to those same queens reading the gospel, and serving them the Eucharist earlier that evening. I've marched in Toronto Pride with my church family, with my priests, with my bishops. I'm one of the lucky ones.

(Trigger warning: The next four paragraphs will talk about General Synod 2019, self-harm, and suicide.)

I've always been one of the lucky ones, but I guess everyone's luck runs out at some point. I arrived at General Synod 2019 still on a "dancing with my queer community at a Pride party after church" high. It was so soon after Toronto Pride that I was still trying to wash the glitter out of my hair. I had some great new outfits and flags that I'd gotten at Pride, and I was ready to throw them on in celebration at seeing my national church family say I could get married—at seeing the canon be changed to something that didn't erase my non-binary identity. That's what I arrived at General Synod ready for. I arrived ready to keep being one of the lucky ones.

But that's not quite what happened. I put on my super queer outfit. I made myself visible on the floor of synod. I spoke my truth about how, even though I am one of the lucky ones, the homophobia in the church has impacted my mental health; and about how it impacts the mental health of hundreds of queer folk across the country and around the world. I shared things I never talk about, about feeling suicidal and about my struggles with self-harm. I poured my guts out to the people in that room, pleading with them to think about the lives of those for whom this is personal as they voted; hoping and praying

as hard as I know how to hope and pray that it would be enough, that the church would choose love and life over exclusion and death.

I remember so clearly the moment the voting closed and what felt like an eternity as we waited for the results to be posted on the screen. I remember already being in tears from the fear of what was about to happen. I remember my bishop holding me as I cried and prayed over and over again: "Please God, please God, please, please, please." I remember the moment I saw the results posted. The moment those "please"s turned into a wordless wail, as my heart broke for my church.

The few days following the marriage canon vote were some of the hardest of my life, both for me and for the people I love who were at General Synod with me. I, along with some of the other youth delegates, very publicly made it clear that we weren't going to take the failed vote laying down. We received overwhelming messages of love and support, but also became the target of negative comments and even a couple of hate blogs. So much of what we were doing was being seen by the whole church. A photo of me in tears seemed to be everywhere I turned. But there was also so much happening behind closed doors that we were hiding. In the second half of General Synod, another queer youth almost attempted suicide. I had to give a self-harm tool to one of my bishops as it was the only way I would be safe from relapse. *[Editor's note: The term "self-harm tool" refers to an object that could be used to harm oneself. At the request of the author, we do not describe the object here to avoid triggering anyone who might be at risk of self-harm.]* When General Synod drew to a close I very nearly checked myself into a hospital so I would be safe, instead of taking my extra week in B.C. to visit friends.

The trauma has continued past General Synod. I have nightmares about General Synod and did end up relapsing into self-harm in the fall, and I am still struggling to overcome the shame that comes alongside a relapse. I know another youth delegate who has flashbacks and nightmares that can hit with no warning. The trauma of General Synod is something that will stay with many queer and allied Anglicans for a very long time. I know that it wasn't just those of us at General Synod who felt it. I know that it was Anglicans across the country who were, and still are, very traumatized by

what happened that Friday night.

And yet, despite all the crap, I'm still one of the lucky ones.

I had a parish to come home to that hung rainbow ribbons out front of the church the Sunday after the vote failed, to show that they are still a safe place; a parish where I was invited to preach and tell my story of General Synod; a parish where I was set to be confirmed on the next Pride Sunday by my out bishop; a parish where, when I find a name that fits and I'm ready to share it with the world, I'll be able to mark that change and important milestone in my life in the liturgy, in my community. I'm one of the lucky ones.

I live in a diocese that has had guidelines in place for queer marriages since General Synod 2016 and will have full equal marriage by this Pentecost; a diocese that knows it still has work to do on becoming a place where all members of the LGBTQ+ community are safe and equal; and it's a diocese with people in it willing to put in that work. I'm one of the lucky ones.

I'm one of the lucky ones because my life has always been full of LGBTQ+ people working to make this church a better place: by holding fussy babies during

communion; by choosing songs that are so theologically rich they shaped my faith as much as most sermons I've heard; by coming as a priest to a tiny two-point parish and inviting the very few youth hanging around over for dinner every other week; by showing me what covenant love looks like; by fighting this fight to fully belong and be fully welcomed in our church since long before I was born. I'm one of the lucky ones because my life has been shaped by so many faithful LGBTQ+ folks without whom I would not be who I am today, and without whom this church would not be the place it is today; because of the people who have come before me and fought so that I could be one of the lucky ones.

And now it's my turn—it's our turn—to continue the fight so the next generation will have more lucky ones. So my story is no longer a rare one. ■

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