

Working Draft, June 2022. Not for circulation.

## **Uniting Church in Australia Assembly Apology to LGBTIQ+ Australians Task Group**

### Discussion Paper

#### **Preface** from the President?

- Since Union in 1977 the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) has recognised that we have failed in different ways, and have offered apologies...
  - o Stolen Generations
  - o Institutional child sexual abuse
- What follows is a Discussion Paper written by members of the Task Group appointed by the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) to prepare an “official apology from the Uniting Church in Australia to LGBTIQ Australians”.
- It is not a position paper from the Uniting Church.
- The paper is offered to assist LGBTIQ and other Church members consider the issues prior to the next meeting of the Assembly in mid-2024.
- Please consider carefully and prayerfully

#### **Introduction**

Following a proposal presented to the Fifteenth Assembly in 2018, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) agreed in 2019 to establish the Apology to LGBTIQ Australians Task Group.

The purpose of the Task Group is to:

*develop the wording of an official apology from the Uniting Church in Australia to LGBTIQ Australians for the Church’s role in the silence, rejection, discrimination and stereotyping of LGBTIQ people, couples and families.<sup>1</sup>*

Further, the Task Group was asked to:

*Consult widely with LGBTIQ and other members of the Church...engage in a respectful process in developing an apology, which will involve listening to all, honestly naming the past and respecting differences. An apology will hopefully contribute to healing and reconciliation within the Uniting Church, with the Australian LGBTIQ communities and the wider society.*

The full Terms of Reference are included as Attachment A.

The purpose of this Discussion Paper is to let members of the Uniting Church know about the work of the Task Group, outline some of the key issues involved, and prepare people for consultations.

#### **Work to date**

The Task Group commenced meeting in October 2020. There was a need for members to carefully consider, in detail, the task that had been set, in its many dimensions. At meetings to date the Task Group has considered pastoral principles for how to offer an apology without further traumatising those affected by the “silence, rejection, discrimination and stereotyping” referred to in the Terms of Reference. We have held meetings with some theologians, the Interim Chair of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and the Assembly Consultant on Multicultural Ministry. In addition,

we have discussed and are aware of the particular concerns of transgender and other gender diverse people. It is highly likely that the details of an apology offered to trans, gender diverse and intersex people is different to that offered to lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

### **Biblical and theological issues**

The Task Group is conscious that there continues to be diverse views in the Uniting Church in matters of human sexuality and gender identity. In preparing an apology on behalf of people within the Uniting Church to the LGBTIQ communities, it is important, first, to recognise the essence of what it is that makes us human. When God created Adam from the earth, God breathed the breath of life into the human, and Adam became a *nephesh*, a living being (Gen 1:30; 2:7). All human beings—indeed, all living creatures—are given life by God’s spirit and share the essence of a *nephesh* (Ps 104:24–30; Job 12:7–10). This is what God first declared to be good—indeed, to be very good (Gen 1:31).

The view that all human beings are the children of a loving God, and are to be treated with dignity and respect without discrimination, has been affirmed by the Uniting Church Assembly on many occasions – commencing with the 1977 *Statement to the Nation*.<sup>ii</sup>

Amongst all the living creatures in God’s creation, there is a wonderful diversity. We can rejoice in the differences that are evident in creation. So, too, we are aware of the diversity that exists across the range of humanity, and we can rejoice in that, as well. In so many ways, human beings exist on a spectrum, ranging across a wide range, from one extreme to another.

Across that spectrum, we recognise that there are diverse gender identities, and different forms of sexual attraction that human beings experience. Perhaps the metaphor of a kaleidoscope captures most clearly how that range of diversity can be perceived. The kaleidoscope reveals multiple colours and many different shapes, all arranged together to form a coherent, yet ever-changing, whole.

It is important that we hold to a theology of inclusion, recognising that all points along the spectrum, all colours and shapes within the kaleidoscope, are valid and are valued. So it is with our approach to the people of the LGBTIQA+ community; first and foremost, we recognise, value, and honour each and every member of this diverse community as fellow human beings. Each person has been created by God, and affirmed, just as they are, as being “very good”.

Within the church, as we survey the wide range of our membership, we honour members of the LGBTIQA+ community as important participants in the life of the church—no less, and no more, important than any other member. We recognise that all people are included in the commandment, that Jesus repeated from Torah, that we are to “love our neighbour” (Matt 22).

The story of Peter’s vision, declaring all foods clean (Acts 10); the story of Philip, graciously incorporating the Ethiopian eunuch into the early community of faith (Acts 8); the liberating baptismal affirmation of Paul, that we are “one in Christ” (Gal 3); these, and other, scripture passages guide us as we seek to live in an open, inclusive, welcoming community of faith.<sup>iii</sup>

The foundational document of the Uniting Church (the Basis of Union) does not specifically address matters of sexuality. It does, however, provide guidelines as to how the church is to be the people of God. It reminds us that we can trust God, as we move through “the changes of history” (para. 4), that we are to be “open to constant reform under [God’s] word” (para. 3), and that we are a community always seeking to enact a “pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal” that God promises (para. 3).

The Basis also commits us, as a church, to “contact with contemporary thought”, to “stand in relationship with contemporary societies” in ways that will “sharpen [our] understanding of the will and purpose of God”, such that this will develop “an informed faith” (para. 11). In that regard, the insights

and learnings of “literary, historical, and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries” (para. 11) has informed and shaped our approach to, and appreciation of, people who identify in ways other than cis-gendered heterosexuals.

As we reflect on the developing understanding and maturing relationship that has emerged in relation to LGBTIQ+ people, we are aware that a central element in our identity as church is that “Christ calls people ... to be disciples of a crucified Lord” (para. 3), and that, as a consequence, we are “a fellowship of [Christ’s] sufferings” (para. 4). We have learnt, sometimes far too slowly, what LGBTIQ people have quickly known, sadly, from their own experiences: that “if one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Cor 12:6).<sup>iv</sup>

So, as we prepare to make this apology, we seek to draw on the depth of resources that are offered by God’s unending grace. We know that we can only be “a fellowship of reconciliation” (para. 3) by trusting in God’s grace; for “the final reconciliation of humanity [takes place] under God’s sovereign grace” (para. 17). As we seek to “make right” our relationships within the church, we are reliant upon God’s grace.

### **Understanding an apology**

As Christians we are familiar with an understanding of repentance for wrongs committed and seeking the forgiveness of God. In undertaking this process, the Task Group recognises that there have been many words and actions that have hurt and harmed LGBTIQ people. We have collaborated with forces that sought to oppress, or to change, LGBTIQ people, and we have allowed the continuation of discriminatory practices and the repetition of damaging words.

Our awareness of this has grown over time and that growing awareness has led to efforts being made, to listen, to appreciate, to understand, to support, to stand with, to honour, and to advocate for, LGBTIQ people. At the same time, our Terms of Reference call for “honestly naming the past”. We accept that many LGBTIQ people’s experience of the Uniting Church involves exclusion, rejection, discrimination, and isolation. Many have left the Church, and some have rejected the faith due to our actions. The Task Group is making no assumptions about a particular response to or outcome from an apology.

A key part of making an apology is having a clear sense of (a) what is being apologised for? and (b) what is going change because of the apology being offered? An apology followed by business as usual might result in more harm than no apology.

### **What is happening in other churches and the wider society?**

It is now common to read of religious and civil society organisations, corporations and governments making an apology. The most well-known example of an apology in Australian life is that offered to indigenous Australians by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008. The Prime Minister moved a motion of Apology to Indigenous Australians. His apology was a formal apology on behalf of the successive parliaments and governments whose policies and laws “inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians”. Since 1998 *National Sorry Day* has been observed in late May.

Several of our partner churches have offered an apology to LGBTIQ people.<sup>v</sup> The wording of such apologies varies considerably. The United Church of Canada has committed to a process of a *living apology* seeking reconciliation.<sup>vi</sup> In Australia, a Christian organisation, Equal Voices, conducted a public Service of “Prayers and Commissioning of a National Apology to LGBTIQ+ Australians” at St James church, Sydney in 2017.<sup>vii</sup>

## **The next steps**

The Task Group believe that the Church is now at the point where we can enter into a dialogue with LGBTIQ people, in the hope that this will enable an apology of honesty and integrity to be offered in 2024. We seek a partnership, in which people of the Uniting Church can learn from, support and strengthen, and deeply value, members of the LGBTIQ community, as we talk with them about things that matter deeply to them.

The Task Group is engaging in a range of consultation in 2022 and 2023 before bringing a final report to the ASC at the end of 2023. That report will be considered carefully in the lead up to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly due to be held in mid-2024.

- Will there be written submissions?
- How will Church members contact the Task Group?
- Key contacts for distressed individuals

## **Task Group members**

Lin Hatfield Dodds (Convenor), Wendy Hendry, Rev Elizabeth Raine, Rev Gordon Ramsay, Graeme Randall, Warren Talbot, and Revd Apelu Tielu

\*

## **Attachment A: Apology to LGBTIQ Australians Task Group**

### **Terms of Reference**

.....

\*

### **Endnotes**

- 
- <sup>i</sup> (Terms of Reference, ASC July 2019).
  - <sup>ii</sup> Coghill and Poulos
  - <sup>iii</sup> Needs suggested references for people who want to follow up
  - <sup>iv</sup> Needs references on the Basis
  - <sup>v</sup> Example
  - <sup>vi</sup> United Church of Canada
  - <sup>vii</sup> Equal Voices