

# Preparing for an Apology to the LGBTIQ community

## Biblical and Theological Framework

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### A. A theology of the human being

In preparing for the process of making an Apology to the LGBTIQ community, it is helpful to begin by considering the “theology of the human being” that we hold.

Our theology of the human being needs to begin with a consideration, not only of the relationship between God and humanity, but of what constitutes the relationship between body and spirit, which together make a human being.

In ancient Jewish tradition, there was no concept of a separate soul. Body, mind, heart and spirit were all intermeshed in one being, one *nephesh*. When God created Adam from earth, he breathed the breath of life into him, and Adam became a *nephesh*, a living being (Gen 1:30).

Accordingly, Hebrew Scripture portrays all living creatures—not just human beings, but all creatures—as being given life by God’s spirit (Gen 1:1–2, 29–30; Ps 104:24–30). Furthermore, all creatures are *nephesh*, all created with the spirit of God within us (Gen 1:20, 21, 24, 30, 2:7; Job 12:7-10). There are no exceptions to this in biblical understanding. There is no binary alternative: all creatures exist within this understanding.

Ancient communities are centred around what is perceived as “normality”. Normality is what is most commonly found. Normality is also what is perceived as necessary to ensure the ongoing survival of society. The communities reflected in the Bible are no exceptions to this.

Humanity is defined as needing to strive for perfection, so we see those who cannot see or hear, with missing limbs or those unable to speak, excluded from worship and community on the basis of how they differ from “perfection” or “normality”. They are perceived as a threat to the good order and flourishing of society, because of their inherent “difference” from the norm. This is reflected in the Law recorded in Hebrew Scripture, as well as in the understandings of the New Testament writers.

By tradition, a theology about the human being has been based on what anthropologists would call “normality”, that is, based on those humans who possess physical and social traits and characteristics that fall within the largest statistical group of humanity across both time and place. Rather than following that line, we propose the development of a theology that consciously and explicitly includes all humans, right across the spectrum.

In modern times, our understanding of normality has broadened from this binary understanding, to one that sees normality as a spectrum. No longer do we exclude people on the basis that their physical appearance does not conform to the physical appearance of the majority of people, for instance.

The understanding that the human brain operates on a spectrum has been well established. Autism is one such example; we now refer to the “autism spectrum”. People can be categorised as being located at various points along that spectrum.

In like fashion, we deal with other illnesses in terms of a spectrum. We do not see people with depression or schizophrenia as being not human, but as people who are an integral part of the broad spectrum of humanity, with their own distinctive conditions.

The same applies to human sexuality. As further research is done, it has become increasingly clear that sexuality, like the brain, is also a spectrum and not confined to a binary state. Gender identity and sexual orientation both sit on spectrums rather than existing in oppositional binary states.

Within such spectrums, there are “standard deviations” which we expect to find in any human population. This is a perfectly “normal” phenomenon. So, today we recognise that there is a range of gender identity along a spectrum of identities, and a range of sexual orientation along a range of sexual orientation.

Our Bible is an ancient document. It was written at a time when “normality” was seen as living within the divine favour and existing in a way that accords with the divine statutes. Those who failed to conform to the “normality” of those statutes were seen as “abnormal”, incomplete and perhaps, at times, sinful. They occupied what we today call “the tails of the bell curve”. They were not seen as “normal” since they were unable to promote the future of community.

In ancient times, sexual behaviour that fell into the expected variation of the tails of the bell curve was frequently perceived as “not normal” and threatening to the community, and an aberration that threatened the survival of the community. That is no longer the case for us, today.

Our theology of the human being needs to underline the claim that all people, no matter where they are located on the bell curve, are *nephesh* and are filled with the spirit of God. No longer do we exclude those who are considered as “not normal” from worship or from the rituals of life which are in place for human beings within our society—such as marriage. So, in recent years, the church has affirmed that, theologically, all human beings are capable of, and have the right to, participate in the marriage ritual within our society. From across the spectrum of human beings, all people are welcomed into the inclusive community of the church.

## **B. A theology of inclusion**

There are many scriptural passages which encourage us, in the context of this theology of being human, to envisage the community of faith as an inclusive community. As people of faith, we are connected through our common experiences of encountering the inclusive love and abundant grace of God. Together, we work to make manifest this vision of welcoming inclusion in the way we shape our communities of faith. The impetus for this vision can be traced through a number of key passages from scripture.

**“Let us create humankind in our image” (Gen 1:26).** In the first creation story, it is clear that, out of all of creation, it is human beings who are *created in God’s image* (Gen 1:26). That God is referred to in the plural in this passage could even suggest the idea of God containing a diversity of identities within God’s own mysterious and infinite self.

The assurance that all human beings are created in God’s image reminds us that everyone is a sacred creation, and that God’s image is broader than our own experience and understanding. Someone may look—or love—differently than you do, and still, simply by being a human, reflect the image of God.

**“What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15).** In a pivotal sequence of events in Acts, Peter has a dream in which he is commanded by God to consume food that is deemed “unclean” according to Jewish law (Acts 10:9–16). When Peter protests, God reminds him that God’s declaration of what is clean is above — and may even contradict — any command of the law.

This dream serves as a crucial instructive for Peter later in the passage, when he encounters Gentiles, which Jewish law would normally reject. This passage reminds us that *incorporation into the community of faith is not defined by our own rules or boundaries*, or even our own understanding of God’s law.

**“And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins” (Mar 2:22).** This saying occurs

in the context of Jesus being questioned as to why his disciples don't rigidly obey the laws of their faith tradition. Jesus' reply is very illuminating: "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made."

Jesus reminds us that *religion, tradition and belief are evolving concepts*, and may require us to re-evaluate and reconsider our traditions and push at the boundaries.

**"What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:26–40).** Philip's encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch probably the most-cited biblical story by those seeking to affirm queer identity within Christian faith. Eunuchs in biblical times were "othered" and ostracized because of their failure to adhere to sexual norms. Common cultural understanding of the time would have held that their status as eunuchs barred them from inclusion in God's community.

And yet, this particular eunuch seeks to follow the path of Christ, even as he continues to live out his sexual "otherness". And he is welcomed and joyfully baptized into Christ's community. The eunuch's question to Philip—"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"—underscores that his *gender identity or sexual status is not a barrier to inclusion* in the eyes of God.

**"For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (Isa 56:3–5).** This text in Isaiah comes from a time after the people of Israel had experienced great upheaval—invasion and conquering by a foreign power, forced removal to a foreign land for a time of "exile", and then return to the land, which appeared familiar yet had become different.

In the midst of this ongoing turmoil, the previous provisions relating to those deemed "sexually other"—re-emphasized generations later in Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch—undergo change. God's love now welcomes and invites into the community of faith those who were regarded as "other". The post-exilic prophet thus predates Jesus' radical message of inclusion and love. *God promises everlasting recognition and inclusion* for all who honour God, regardless of whether they have been deemed outsiders.

**"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isa 43:1).** Earlier in the book of the prophet Isaiah, a voice speaking in the immediacy of return from exile reiterates and emphasizes *God's steadfast love and protection for God's people*. This verse in particular reminds believers that we are loved and claimed by a God who redeems us and will always be with us—not out of our own achievement or deserving but out of God's devotion. It is an earlier indication of the message of unconditional grace that flourished as a result of the teachings of a later prophet, Jesus of Nazareth.

**"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).** This well-known passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians is used in many contexts to sound *the Christian call of unity in the face of division and difference*. In fact, most of Galatians is an instruction to early Christians to embrace Gentile followers of Jesus, even though they did not share in other early believers' Jewish history, tradition, or laws.

Paul makes clear in these verses and elsewhere that Christ's promise is abundant and available to all people, and that those divisions and prejudices that have historically kept groups of people apart or given some power to some over others have no place in Christ's community.

The particular phrase "there is no longer male and female" offers a challenge to traditional binary understandings of gender roles. The conjunction "and" is used rather than "or", offering the possibility of seeing a spectrum running across the range of X to Y (rather than a binary opposition of X or Y).

**"Love God ... love your neighbour ... on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt 22:37–40).** Jesus undoubtedly knew the provisions of Torah, and adhered to the guidance of the ordinances and commandments. He could engage critically with specific provisions; but he did not overthrow the whole system of guidance and instruction. In Matthew's Gospel, in particular, Jesus

addresses the great number of Jewish laws and prophetic teachings—including those that many consider condemn homosexuality—by making clear that the overarching command of a faithful life is love: love of God, and love of neighbour.

This *command to love* underpins any and all other commands. And so, pursuit of law-abiding faithfulness that does not first root itself in love fails to understand the true purpose of the law and the true call of faith.

**“For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps 139:13).** This famous psalm sings of *God’s intimate and intentional knowledge of each person*. It suggests that every crucial part of our identity was known to God, crafted by God before we were born — and that, as beings made in such love, we are created good. This psalm also suggests that there is nowhere we can go that will remove us from God’s steadfast love and presence.

**“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables” (Matt 15:21–28).** Jesus, in Matthew’s Gospel, is resolutely Jewish. He sees that his own ministry is focussed on the people of Israel (Matt 15:24) and he forbids his followers from taking the good news to the Gentiles (Matt 10:5). When Jesus’ encounters a Canaanite woman, he recognises that her nationality makes her an outsider. On this basis even Jesus rejects her when she comes seeking his help for her daughter.

But the Canaanite woman challenges Jesus on his refusal, and Jesus changes his mind: he praises her faith and heals her daughter after all. This encounter demonstrates that God’s love is so expansive, it can surprise and stretch even Jesus Christ himself. It encourages Christians to be mindful of our own prejudices and understand that *God’s love isn’t as restrictive as our own*.

**“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7).** Paul was writing to a community of faith where, he had been told, there was tension, possibly even division. Jews and Gentiles each had come to faith in Jesus; but different practices, from different traditions, were causing tensions. What Paul writes is not just a nice-sounding phrase that churches like to put on their walls. Paul is telling believers in Rome to provide *full acceptance of others*, to include other believers in community with themselves—including those who disagree strongly about what is and is not permitted. Grappling with difference in a loving and respectful way is the essence of living the Gospel.

**“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7–8).** The whole book of 1 John emphasizes *the centrality of love*. It suggests that love is always from God, and a reflection of God. Thus any genuine love, no matter what form it takes, comes from God and glorifies God. Anyone seeking to follow God must also seek to love others. We must trust that anyone who loves is also born of God.

(The above passages and comments are based on a study by Layton E. Williams at <https://sojo.net/articles/10-bible-passages-teach-christian-perspective-homosexuality>, accessed 06/03/2019)

This is the context within which we approach the enterprise of shaping an Apology to the LGBTIQ community—a context of inclusive love, abundant grace, and welcoming acceptance.

### **C. Grounding the Apology in the theology of the *Basis of Union***

In considering, then, the theological foundations for the process of making an Apology to the LGBTIQ communities, we do well to explore how the *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church positions the church in relation to emerging matters in the wider society. The *Basis* provides a number of perspectives which help to inform the shaping of such an Apology.

#### **1 Through the changes of history (para 4)**

The *Basis* clearly identifies the stance of the church as being an organisation that is open to the possibilities of change, shaping different forms of church life, mission, and ministry. Seeded throughout the *Basis* are phrases which illuminate this fundamental stance. The church is “awaiting with hope” (1) ... “on the way (towards the promised goal)” (3) ... living “through the changes of history” (4) ... shaping “fresh words and deeds” (11). (References in parenthesis throughout this section refer to quotations from the relevant paragraph of the *Basis of Union*.)

Indeed, the *Basis* affirms that the church “stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission” (11). As we have seen the increasingly public recognition of the reality of different gender identities and ways of expressing sexuality, the church needs to be able to reflect on what this means for our own self-identity and self-understanding.

The Uniting Church, of course, identifies as a Protestant church, standing with other churches who are heirs of the Reformation. In the process of seeking church union, and drafting the *Basis* for that union, our forebears in the faith held firm to the belief that the church was called to be always seeking renewal. It saw that supreme authority was vested in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who is made known to us through the prophetic and apostolic witness of Scripture. It affirmed that salvation was possible only because of God’s abundant grace.

So the opening paragraph of the *Basis* declares that the three denominations which united in 1977 “remain open to constant reform under his Word” and affirms that “they look for a continuing renewal in which God will use their common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people”. The orientation of the church is towards “that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation” (3).

## **2 Looking for a continual renewal (para 1)**

What will this reform and renewal look like, as we prepare to make an Apology to the LGBTIQ community? Any such reform needs to begin with a *recognition* of the existing realities, especially as they relate to the place that LGBTIQ people have had in society, in Christian churches in general, and in the Uniting Church in particular. This fundamental recognition, seeing the past through the eyes of the present, is what drives the process of shaping an Apology.

This recognition might then best be followed by an *acknowledgement* of how those realities have impacted the church. Whilst the way that LGBTIQ people have been marginalised, labelled, mistreated, and demonised, has been of deep significance for them, so also our recognition of their realities will inform what we want to do and say. Acknowledging that we have been affected even as we realise how LGBTIQ people have been affected, is critical.

The next step is to demonstrate *acceptance* of the situation, and express repentance for what needs to be done. The reality, for many LGBTIQ people, is that their sense of being accepted within society, by sections of the Christian church, and within the Uniting Church, has been a slow, painful, and not always smooth process. Various gains have been offset by losses. As the church, we need to demonstrate our awareness that this has not been a straightforward, linear developmental process for LGBTIQ people.

So our *repentance* is not simply stating that we are sorry, and we are hoping that we can go on together, united in faith, bonded by love. Our repentance needs to encompass the fact that, just as LGBTIQ people might have sensed that that we were making progress on our understanding and acceptance of them, we as the church have stumbled, placing another barrier in their way, raising another harsh word, implementing another discriminatory action.

As the church, we need to repent, not just for failing to understand, but also for failing to embed our developing understandings into our actions and policies. We need to offer *multiple repentances*, each specific, targeted, precise.

From those acts of repentance, a *recommitment* to walking forward together will be made. The Apology ought thus to provide clear indication as to this intention to recommit together. The Apology might well articulate some specific hopes as to what might be done together in the future.

It is the hope that such *acts of repentance* will lead to a renewal in the life of the church in this particular area. The ultimate goal of this repentance is to demonstrate the claim that we, as the Uniting Church, are indeed a community in which we enact a “pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal” (3). The goal of this Apology is thus, in theological terms, ultimately eschatological, as well as immediately relational.

Confessing past wrongs and committing to new ways is a hard task. It is integral to the process of offering an authentic, realistic, relevant Apology. It is not something to be done quickly or lightly. As a church, we will need to be open to what might eventuate from such a deep confession. We will need to pray, in the words of John Wesley, “put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt ... put me to doing, put me to suffering ... let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee ... let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing”.

Confessing past wrongs, when this is done sincerely, prayerfully, intentionally, opens the door for us to walk towards a new way of behaving, a new way of relating, a new way of speaking.

In our *Basis of Union*, we hear the church declaring that it “prays that it may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds” (11). The *Basis* enjoins the councils of the church to “enter a period of self-examination in which members are asked to consider afresh their common commitment to the Church’s mission and their demonstration of its unity” (15). Both of these phrases point to a hope for ongoing renewal, refreshment, and revitalisation. Can those lofty ideals be pressed into service in this process of developing an Apology for the LGBTIQ community?

### **3 By contact with contemporary thought (para 11)**

The *Basis* positioned the church in a positive, engaging relationship with society as a whole. We are not a sect, shutting ourselves off from the world. We are an open, engaging, welcoming community of faith. A significant aspect of this positioning is the way that the *Basis of Union* offers clear affirmations of “contemporary society” and “contemporary thought” (11). They are important factors which can illuminate the thinking of the church and guide the acting of the church.

The years since the creation of the *Basis*—over five decades ago, now—have seen significant developments in the theology and practice of the church over that period. The Uniting Church has travelled from the provision of missions for Aboriginal people by its predecessor denominations, to the formation of the *Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress* (1985), the signing of a *Covenant with Aboriginal People* (1994), the adoption of a *Revised Preamble to the Constitution* (2009) and the recognition of the *sovereignty* of the First Peoples (2018). All of this signals growth and development in relationships and understandings within the church, shaped by movements in the wider society as well as in relationships within the church.

Those same decades have seen the development of a Uniting Church commitment to stewardship for the creation. Signalled first in the *Statement to the Nation* (1977), a series of policies and actions have flowed over the years in this regard. We are aware of what it means to live *For the Sake of the Planet and all its People* (2006). As the awareness of the need for environmental responsibility and sustainable living has grown in society, the commitment of the Uniting Church has deepened and strengthened.

Likewise, we can note how a commitment to ministry with people with disabilities, and an awareness of appropriate responses to sexual misconduct, child sexual abuse and, more recently, domestic and family violence, have developed, in conjunction with a clearer awareness of these issues in society as a whole.

The same is the case in relation to people within the LGBTIQ community. As medical, psychological, and sociological fields have turned their attention to the issues being faced by people within this community,

**Commented [WT1]:** The United Church of Canada have approached the process by means of a Living Apology project. Through Colleen we’ve sought information from the UCC. Also our Terms do not necessarily presume there **will be** an apology, though my firm view remains that there should be such a statement.

the awareness and knowledge of these people has grown in society. Associated with this, there has been a growth in understanding within the Uniting Church.

A greater awareness of the legal disadvantages experienced by members of this community has developed over recent decades. An understanding of the reality that there are LGBTIQ people to be found within any given group of people in society has become widespread and accepted within society. There was a high public profile given to a range of matters associated with this community during the period leading up to the non-binding Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey held in 2017. Many other instances could be cited, demonstrating the way that “contemporary society” and “contemporary thought” have assisted the development of a deeper awareness and wider acceptance of LGBTIQ people in society.

The Uniting Church has engaged with these and other developments, and has undertaken discussions and made decisions which reflect a commitment to “confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds” (11). This can be seen in the national report on *Homosexuality and the Church* (1985), the comprehensive report on *Uniting Sexuality and Faith* (1997), the decision of the 10th Assembly relating to *sexuality and leadership*, and the decision of the 15th Assembly regarding *marriage* (2018). Each of these matters were undertaken in conjunction with careful analysis and listening of the latest understandings within “contemporary thought” in the “contemporary society” of Australia.

The matter now under consideration—making an Apology to members of the LGBTIQ community—is likewise to be undertaken after consideration of what other churches and organisations have done in this regard, and how this kind of relational approach has been fostered by groups and organisations in our society.

#### **4 The coming reconciliation and renewal (para 3)**

In the Uniting Church, as already noted, we seek to be a community in which we live as a “pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal” (3). The central dynamic of the way that God is at work in the world, and the call that God sets before people of faith, is reconciliation.

*Reconciliation* is a concept that is central to the story running through scripture. Stories of reconciliation can be read in Hebrew Scriptures, where tension and alienation between family members can be overcome by honest re-engagement and reconciliation. We see this with Jacob and Esau (Gen 32–33), and again with Joseph and his brothers (Gen 50:12–21).

Of course, the central belief of the Christian church is that in the person of Jesus Christ, God has come to be one with us, fully sharing our humanity, whilst remaining fully God present with us; and that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, all things are reconciled to God (Colossians 1:15–20). Reconciliation is the consequence and result of God acting in Christ.

The letter to the Ephesians affirms this central belief about Christ, using vivid and dramatic imagery: “he is our peace, who has made us both one .... that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Eph 2:14–16). The notion that reconciliation takes place “through the blood of Christ” most likely looks back to the ancient Israelite custom of smearing blood on the altar to effect reconciliation (the blood of bulls at Lev 8:15; the blood of goats at 2 Chron 29:24).

Reconciliation is the work of the Gospel. Paul affirms that “we rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom 5:11). He presses the point, that Christ has given us “the ministry of reconciliation” and entrusted to us “the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18–19). This is grounded in the understanding that “in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19 — the only biblical passage actually directly quoted in the *Basis of Union*).

Jesus, in the collection of sayings we have labelled the Sermon on the Mount, is said to have advised on the importance of seeking reconciliation. “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember

that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt 5:23–24).

Key theological affirmations which the *Basis* makes about Jesus reiterate the centrality of *renewal and reconciliation*: Jesus is "the beginning of a *new* creation, of a *new* humanity", "a pledge and foretaste of that coming *reconciliation* and *renewal* which is the end in view for the whole creation", and "a representative beginning of a *new* order of righteousness and love" (all in para 3). Paragraph 4 concludes with a similar affirmation about the disciples of Christ, that "in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and *renews* them as his Church". Renewal is central to these paragraphs, the theological heart of the Basis.

*Renewal* can be understood in terms of interpersonal relationships; individually, we each need to reconcile with those from whom we have been alienated. The dynamics of that process of reconciliation require honesty, integrity, humility, and perseverance. Collectively, the same features ought to mark the process. Our communal engagement, as church, with the community of LGBTIQ people, is to be marked by honesty, integrity, humility, and perseverance.

### **5 The fellowship of Christ's sufferings (para 3)**

In preparing to offer an Apology to the LGBTIQ community, the Uniting Church needs to face with honesty the pain and suffering of individuals within that community. That pain and suffering has been caused by members of the Church, acting either with a level of intention or at times in ignorance, speaking deliberately words of hurt or making careless and unthinking comments.

An awareness of this reinforces for members of the Church the description of the Church as a "fellowship of suffering"—the very body into which "Christ calls people ... to be disciples of a crucified Lord" (3). Whilst we ought not to be deliberately looking for suffering, when we do encounter it, we need to recognise that this is the reality of who we are. *Suffering* is a central aspect of living by faith.

Paul declares that "it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil 1:29). The author of 1 Peter seeks to encourage his readers by noting "when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God; for to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Pet 2:20–21). Such encouragement, however, does not in itself provide satisfactory resolution for LGBTIQ people who have experienced suffering.

Paul does assert that "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 2 Cor 1:3–5). This opens a different pathway for our consideration.

If God's work is to provide comfort in the midst of affliction, then our ministry to people of the LGBTIQ community is likewise to comfort the afflicted. Such comfort can only be realistically offered, and genuinely accepted, if and when there is a clear statement about the factors which have caused such affliction. The pain, hurt, marginalisation, and oppression of LGBTIQ people has come, in part, from people of faith—from members of our own church, over the years.

We are a "fellowship of Christ's sufferings" in that we acknowledge, confess, and repent of the ways that we have contributed to these sufferings. We do not make this approach with a sense of certainty in ourselves; rather, we open ourselves in vulnerability to the hurts of those to whom we seek to apologise. To offer an Apology means to hear the pain, to listen deeply to the hurts, to accept responsibility for what has been said and done (without ever seeking to defend ourselves by claiming, "well, I never said that or did that"). The fellowship of Christ's sufferings is a fellowship, in that we seek to enter into the experience of the other, know from their point of view what that suffering was like.

Elsewhere in his letters, Paul talks about the body of Christ in a way that confirms this must always be the case. "If one member suffers, all suffer together", he writes to the believers in Corinth (1 Cor 12:26a).



Suffering, if it is the experience of one or a few, becomes the experience of the whole—everyone connected within the body shares in that suffering.

This, then, is to be an integral part of the dynamic that we seek to implement, when we, as a church, offer an Apology to members of the LGBTIQ community. To show that we are actually “a fellowship of Christ’s sufferings”, we will need to ensure that deep listening, active empathy, and humble honesty are all part of the process.

### **6 The grace which justifies (para 10)**

Undergirding the process of reconciliation, but empathising with those who suffer, is the *grace* which God offers to each of us. Reaching out in confession to seek forgiveness requires a modicum of what we call “grace” in the way that we behave. Such human grace shares in the quality of grace which is offered and enacted by God in the Gospel. Indeed, it is clear that “the final reconciliation of humanity [takes place] under God’s sovereign grace” (17).

The Basis affirms the importance of this grace at a number of points. The message of Jesus is understood in terms of God’s grace; “Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive God’s love” (3). That whole consideration of God’s work announced by Jesus ends by pressing the same claim, “the whole work of salvation is effected by the sovereign grace of God alone” (3). This is the heart of the good news we confess.

The story of God’s grace in Jesus is told in short form within the ecumenical creeds of the church, the confessions known as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. Our commitment to these creeds (para 9) is extended by reference to the historic witness of reformation leaders (para 10). Of course, all of these documents need to be submitted to “the discipline of interpreting their teaching in a later age” (9). As we engage with our current context, so we reconsider and reshape our understanding of these ancient texts.

In these latter documents, “the congregation of Christ’s people” is able to read of “the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier” (10). That this is a central Reformation claim, in the way that scripture is interpreted by Protestants, need not be argued in detail at this point. Certainly, Paul highlights this as the centre of his understanding of the gospel: “I am not ashamed of the gospel ... for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Rom 1:16–17).

In classic Christian theology, whilst the nature of God is seen to entail “righteousness”, the cognate term “justification” is pressed into service to describe how God engages with human beings and relates with them. (The root words ‘righteous’ and ‘justify’ reflect two ways in English that the same Greek or Hebrew word might be rendered—what is *right*, what is *just*.)

What God does with us is to “justify”, to “make right”, as an act of God’s grace. This act of “making right” could be understood in terms of the processes employed in a judicial context, where “restorative justice” is practised. (See later section of paper for discussion of restorative justice.)

Thus, it can be seen that a theological claim which is central to our identity as the Uniting Church, standing in the catholic and reformed traditions, can guide the central dynamic that we put into play when we offer our Apology to the LGBTIQ community. As we seek to “make right” our relationships, we are enacting the very heart of the Gospel that we live and proclaim.

### **D. Dealing with scripture passages that historically have provided difficulties**

Before concluding this consideration of the groundwork that is required as the church prepares to make an Apology to the LGBTIQ communities, it is necessary to note that handful of scripture passages which have exercised an inordinately huge influence on the church—and, indeed, on society as a whole—in

relation to various matters associated with same-gender relationships and the range of gender identities which exist amongst humanity.

The passages have often been referred to as the “clobber passages” (because they have been used to “clobber” LGBTIQ people). It is not the place to engage in a full, detailed exegesis of these passages—much time and energy has been devoted to this task, both in scholarship, and by previous Task Groups of the Uniting Church. What is offered here is a broad overview of the issues, much in the same way as in the earlier survey of “inclusive passages”.

In keeping with the *Basis of Union*, the way we approach these biblical texts is to draw on the insights of critical scholarship in order to develop a clear understanding of what is, and what is not, referred to in these passages. This is consistent with the commitment of the church to “sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought”, through drawing on “the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries”, which leads to the articulation of “an informed faith” (para 15).

In surveying these passages, it is to be noted that none of them must, by necessity, be seen as weapons to be used to “clobber” LGBTIQ people. Each passage needs to be understood within its context. Previous careful work has been undertaken to indicate just how this interpretative process illuminates these texts, and does not provide any warrant for their earlier negative, hurtful, and harmful use, by the church, against LGBTIQ people.

The first thing to note is that the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek languages, so there are questions about how particular words should be translated, whether there are exact equivalences in English, and so on. A key observation is that many translations use the word “homosexual” where the original language actually requires more nuance in translation.

A second factor is that we need to reflect on the cultural customs of the societies within which the Bible came to be written. It is important to consider how these cultural customs have shaped the way in which the words were written. “Homosexuality” is a modern concept, which was not known to the writers of the biblical texts in the way that we understand it. Scripture does not show awareness of the loving, committed, lifelong relationship of two people of the same gender. There is a clear cultural difference between the world of the texts of scripture, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

**Leviticus 18:** Neither the oft-quoted verse about same-gender sex (*Leviticus 18:22*), nor a similar statement two chapters later (*Leviticus 20:13*), are dealing primarily with same gender relationships, but about cultural shaming practices, using power to create inequality in relationship. This text occurs in a section of Leviticus called “The Holiness Code” which has as its main purpose to set out laws to keep Israel different from the surrounding cultures.

The rules in this section of Leviticus were meant to set the Israelites apart from the Canaanites and Egyptians, who at that time participated in fertility rites in their temples that involved different forms of sex, including homosexual sex. Male-to-male sex was seen to mix the roles of man and woman and such “mixing of kinds” during ancient times was defined as an “abomination,” in the same way that mixing different kinds of seeds in a field was an abomination.

These verses critique the practice in which a stronger male seeks to subordinate and demean a weaker male, through sexual activity. This is what is declared to be an “abomination”. This abusive and shaming action is not what we are talking about when we refer to same gender relationships today: committed, loving, long-term relationships between two equal people.

**Genesis 19:1–29:** The same applies to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (told in *Genesis 19*). This story is an example of what happens when God’s people do not live up to God’s expectations. It provides a lesson about the importance of hospitality to the stranger—a key value in ancient Israelite society. The cruel men of the town were planning to rape the visitors and were definitely not homosexuals. The

prophet Ezekiel, inspired by the spirit (*Ezekiel 16:49-50*), declares that this is not about sexual sin, but about the sin of not providing hospitality.

**Judges 19:1–30:** The terrible story of the Levite's concubine (*Judges 19*) also deals with hospitality. It is clear that hostile men used a breach of hospitality protocols as a weapon against other men, seeking to shame the strangers in this way. Like the story of Sodom (*Gen 19*), this account shows the extremely inhospitable behaviour of the town. Some mistakenly interpret the townsmen's behaviour to be somehow related to homosexuality, but this was an example of the brutality of one group of men toward a group of visitors. This, again, is not about a same-gender relationship where equality and mutuality are paramount. It is about violating a cultural norm in an abusive and violent manner.

**Genesis 1:1–2:4a:** This passage provides a clear affirmation that God made a good creation, and encouraged human beings to enter into positive relationships with each other within that good creation (*Genesis 1–2*). Our human expression of sexuality is one way of expressing the goodness of that creation. We ought not to exclude people who are attracted to people of the same gender from this understanding.

**Romans 1:18–27:** The behaviour which Paul was addressing here is explicitly associated with idol worship (probably temple prostitution). It is directed towards heterosexual people who searched for pleasure and broke away from their natural sexual orientation or their natural ways of having sex (both male and female) and participated in promiscuous sex with anyone available or used methods not culturally accepted.

In the surrounding culture, it was common for men of a higher status to take sexual advantage of male slaves or male prostitutes. Here Paul is instructing his readers to keep pure and honour God. Paul is talking about the use and misuse of power and authority and how that impacts one's relationship with God. Paul didn't have in mind specifically prohibiting consensual same-sex relationships, because they were never considered in his cultural context.

**1 Corinthians 6:9–10:** In Paul's vice-list he identifies a list of sinners whom he declares will not be granted entry into the kingdom of God. Amongst the thieves and robbers, drunkards and "revilers" we find a number of sexual transgressions mentioned. This includes two critical words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoites*. The term *malakoi* means "soft" and is also interpreted as male prostitutes. The word *arsenokoites* is difficult to translate, but it probably refers to a male using his superiority to take sexual advantage of another male. Paul is right to condemn these sexual activities, but this has nothing to do with a consensual homosexual relationship.

References to sexual sins in Paul's letters (in both *Romans 1* and *1 Corinthians 6*) sit alongside a range of other sins, which are equally condemned, and equally challenging to our discipleship. It is quite legitimate to ask, why single one particular sin out? Paul related all of these sins to idolatry, which, for him, was the fundamental sin. A loving relationship between people of the same gender is not idolatrous, but rather it can strengthen a sense of the value of human life which God desires for us. Paul was writing about the abuse of relationships, which is quite different from the expression of a loving, faithful relationship.

**1 Timothy 1:8–11:** This passage is similar to *1 Cor 6*, above. This time it is a list of sins (as opposed to sinners) and includes the words  *pornos*, *arsenokoites* and *andrapodistes*. Each term needs to be clearly understood. The word  *pornos* most likely refers to a male having sex outside of marriage, presumably with a female (but also, feasibly, with a male); the second term, *arsenokoites* (found also in *1 Cor 6*) can probably be defined as male same-sex relationships that involved some level of exploitation, inequality or abuse. Finally, *andrapodistes* can be translated as "slave traders."

Scholars believe that the three terms were used together in that slave dealers (*andrapodistes*) would be acting as pimps for captured boys ( *pornos*) who would be taken advantage of by powerful men (*arsenokoites*). These are sins that certainly need to be addressed, but this particular passage does not relate to homosexuals in a committed relationship.

**Jesus:** In all four Gospels, Jesus rarely discusses sexuality; when he does, there is very little detail. This topic rates as of only tiny significance for him, alongside the greatest focus which Jesus had—on wealth and poverty, and the importance of serving those on the edge, those who are in need. There is no saying or parable of Jesus that directly addresses the situation of LGBTIQ people in particular—apart from the fact that such people are part of the whole of humanity who are addressed in the same way by Jesus in all of his teachings.

From this very brief survey of key passages, we are able to affirm that the most important conclusion to draw from the scholarly explorations of relevant biblical texts, is this: *what God wants from human beings, is a commitment to loving, respectful relationships, a commitment to long-term, hopefully lifelong, relationships.* In short, the specific genders of people in relationships is less important than the quality of relationship shown between individuals in relationship with each other.

In the Church, we affirm that *God is faithful*—that those who diligently seek to know the will of God, will be upheld and loved by God. God is not disturbed by differences of opinion; God made a diverse creation, and God honours our search for truth within that creation.

In Jesus, we see the key attributes of God, lived out in a human life. The Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* declares that "in his life and in his death, he made a response of humility, obedience and trust" (para 3). These are the key qualities of a faithful life. These qualities are the controlling lenses through which we should read the biblical texts, and develop our understanding of sexuality and marriage.

A *heterosexual relationship*, at its best, will exhibit mutual respect, deep love, faithful commitment, and personal humility in placing the other as first. So too can a *same gender relationship*. Medical, psychological, and social explorations show that a relationship between two people of the same gender, can itself exhibit the best of human qualities, and demonstrate the finest moral values in human relationship. It can certainly exhibit mutual respect, deep love, faithful commitment, and personal humility in placing the other as first.

**Reinterpretation.** Throughout the New Testament, we can see places where NT writers offer *radical reinterpretations* of the norms of their cultural and religious practices. The accounts of the ministry of Jesus tell us of Jesus' affirmation of women, his willingness to break religious law by healing on the Sabbath, and his redefining of aspects of Jewish law in the light of his message of the coming kingdom.

The accounts of the early Church include instances where *redefinition and breakthrough* took place: most strikingly, in *Acts 10*, as we have already noted. This chapter tells the story of Peter, who was a faithful adherent to a long-established pattern of eating in the manner that was set forth in the laws of Leviticus. He was told that what he did not eat—because it was "unclean"—he was now free to eat—because God had declared such food "clean".

This opened the way, in the early church, to a new way of inclusive table fellowship where Jews and Gentiles are welcome to eat and share together. Who is to say that the spirit, which once moved in this way, is now not able to move in a similar way, and to declare what some consider "unclean" to be "clean"—and that we can rejoice in this!

In *Ephesians*, a standard Hellenistic pattern (a "household table") is adapted to instruct husbands and wives. *Eph 5:21–33*, while appearing on the surface to reinforce patriarchal norms of wives submitting to husbands, actually instructs husbands to love their wives with self-sacrificing love ("as Christ gave himself for the Church") and encompasses all marriage relationships under the heading, "submit yourselves to one another". This was a radical reinterpretation of the marriage relationship itself, even within the first few decades of the life of the church.

The biblical account shows that the spirit comes to faithful people, offers a vision of a new way, and opens hearts and minds to a greater vision which broadens the impact of the good news and reinvigorates missional activity. In the Uniting Church, we seek to walk in that new way, faithful to the

witness of scripture, and open to the guidance of the Spirit, accepting of new insights and welcoming to all. That is the foundation upon which we now seek to offer an Apology to the LGBTIQ communities.

Elizabeth Raine and John Squires

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For a later section of the paper

Restorative justice engages those who have been offended against as well as those who are charged with offending, placing them into a safe space where conversation can take place with regard to the offence committed. The emphasis is on “being heard, understood, having questions answered, taking responsibility, showing remorse and contributing towards healing” (RMIT Centre for Innovative Justice”,

<https://cij.org.au/opencircle/what-is-restorative-justice/>)

Furthermore, the principles of restorative justice have been employed in faith settings, for purposes including “to improve human behavior, strengthen civil society, provide effective leadership, restore relationships and repair harm” (the International Institute for Restorative Practices, quoted at <https://network.crcna.org/biblical-justice/overview-restorative-practices>).

One such practitioner in North America, Becky Jones, has described her work in this way: “we are always working towards healing in the midst of our earthly brokenness”. This offers a relevant and useful approach when we consider how we might proceed with shaping and offering an Apology to the LGBTIQ community in Australia.

**Commented [WT2]:** Some of this material might be better in the section of the paper which discusses the meaning of apology.