

Apology to LGBTIQ Australians Task Group - UCA

Principles

(1) That we seek to ensure that no more damage to individuals takes place as a result of our processes and any action we recommend to the Assembly.

(1) Ensure no avoidable harm to individuals results from processes recommended to the Assembly

(2) That people's agency and autonomy are respected.

(2) Respect agency and autonomy of all involved in the apology process

(3) Recognition that a part of health is pain.

(3) Work towards health, embracing pain as part of the healing process

(4) That enabling people's stories to be heard and validated is a key element of the process of developing an Apology.

(4) Hear and validate people's stories as a key element in developing an Apology

Implementing the Principles

The starting point of any set of principles must be the needs of those for whom the principles are directed. We recognise that in developing an Apology, there are four different groups who will be impacted by the Apology. As such, these principles must recognise the needs of each of these four groups. These four groups are:

- 1) LGBTIQ+ individuals within the UCA
- 2) LGBTIQ+ individuals outside the UCA
- 3) UCA members who recognise the need to offer an Apology to the LGBTIQ+ community
- 4) UCA members who are concerned that offering an Apology to the LGBTIQ+ community would weaken the faith authority of the UCA

It is because there are different groups to whom the principles are applied, and impacted by the principles, that the principles themselves do not articulate a particular group. The principles are written to be inclusive of all. Each of the principles must be equally applied to each of the groups impacted.

Each of these groups have their own needs and objectives. Some of these may appear at first glance to be opposed. Some of the needs of the different groups may overlap. Applying the principles requires careful unpacking of the needs of each of these groups and may involve holding the needs of each of these groups in tension. Such a task requires a greater understanding of the needs of each of the groups. Unpacking the needs of each of the groups helps to understand the driving force behind the Apology, and in turn, how to understand and apply the principles.

Recognition of past and current harm

Before any meaningful apology process can be engaged, there needs to be a recognition of harm. This may be from being excluded from any level of ministry, excluded from the church, excluded from families. It may have resulted from theological teaching that has induced shame on the individual. It may be from a lack of a caring pastoral approach.

Hearing, acknowledging, and validating the stories of past and current harm

Part of healing is the ability to be able to express the harm that has been experienced, and have it truly heard. Without hearing, acknowledging, and validating these stories, any attempt at an apology will likely be experienced as a hollow gesture.

Hearing such stories, however, can be painful. This pain goes beyond hearing the pain of the individual. It requires the listener to be challenged and recognise the role of the church – as well as individuals within the church – in the pain. This can cause those hearing the pain to feel as though their identity – and the identity of the church – has been attacked. It may require a re-evaluation of individual and corporate identity.

Truly hearing the stories of individuals will provide direction for the apology process. Hearing the stories of those in pain prevents making assumptions regarding their pain and need. For an apology to be meaningful, it must speak to the pain and need of those receiving the apology. Truly hearing the pain of those who have been harmed and be directed towards appropriate action by that pain, will enable those who have been harmed to feel as though they are truly heard and embraced. This is empathy at its' core.

Ensuring individuals are not unavoidably harmed through the apology process

At the heart of the apology process is a desire to seek reconciliation, healing, and a return to wholeness within the part of the body of Christ, represented by the UCA and its' members. Matthew 5:23-24 reminds us ²³ *So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,* ²⁴ *leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.* '.

The Task Group recognises that this process is often accompanied by pain. Yet, pain may often be initially interpreted as harm. As such, avoidance of all harm or pain is not realistic or psychologically healthy.

The principles therefore require the apology process be undertaken, such that it does not cause unavoidable pain or harm. This assumes a level of necessary pain for the apology to be both meaningful and lead towards reconciliation, healing, and wholeness.

The nature of trauma is such that remembering the trauma through talking about it can re-traumatise the individual. Ensuring individuals are not harmed requires respect and sensitivity. Individuals need to be allowed to *not* tell their story.

Individuals may experience further harm through being re-traumatized by hearing other people's stories. Applying the principles requires establishment of protocols that ensure individuals are not exposed to the stories of harm of others. Confidentiality and anonymity alone are *not* sufficient.

However, it is not only those from the LGBTIQ+ community and their allies who have been harmed or may be re-harmed/re-traumatized. As noted, members of the UCA may be traumatized through hearing the stories of those who have been harmed. This will require sensitivity in selecting those who engage in this part of the apology process, as well as providing them with appropriate support.

Harm may occur where individuals have not had the opportunity to experience the journey that has led to the need for the apology, the apology process, and the apology itself. The apology process then provides a unique opportunity to invite all members of the UCA to engage with the journey, thereby not only significantly reducing unavoidable harm, but changing harm that is experienced into a healing process.

We see this process throughout scripture. Biblical characters experiencing change and growth through their journey. The parable of *'The Prodigal Son'* reminds us that the change process may be costly. It reminds us that after the journey, life cannot be the same. Job experienced great change through his painful journey. The Acts of the Apostles illustrate change through often painful journeys which challenged them to their core.

The concept of an apology to the LGBTIQ+ community and their allies may be experienced by some within the UCA as an attack on their faith and identity as Christians. This presents a unique opportunity to prevent unavoidable harm, and to work towards greater unity. The UCA by definition is a *union*. Unions often require the holding in tension of various points of view. The nature of union provides the opportunity for education regarding the harm experienced by those of the LGBTIQ+ community and their allies, as well as a reminder of the strength of union.

Providing appropriate pastoral support where there is harm

The church as the body of Christ exists to bring healing and wholeness. However, as previously noted, growth and healing are often accompanied by pain and grief. For example, in challenging one's concept of identity, significant grief will likely ensue. The UCA has a responsibility as members of the Body of Christ to provide appropriate support – both pastorally and psychologically – as part of the healing process.

The provision of appropriate pastoral response to harm – wherever it is experienced – is an action that accompanies the apology. This may be costly – both financially and personally. It will require the provision of services. It may require the individuals to confront their own part in causing harm, thereby experiencing pain themselves.

This action can allow those within the UCA who see the need to offer an apology to express their desire for reconciliation, healing, and wholeness. It demonstrates the acknowledgment of harm and the need for an apology. For some, this may be embodied in the parable of *'the lost sheep'*, where the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in search of the one that is lost. For some, it may be an expression of love, as illustrated in 1 Corinthians 13, or 1 John 4:7-8 *'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.'*

The Status of An Apology

The temptation is to assume the overarching need of all those within the LGBTIQ+ community and their allies – whether within or outside the UCA – is to receive an apology from the UCA. However, it is likely to be far more complicated. Individuals may not be ready to receive an apology due to the hurt they have received and perhaps continue to endure. Others might be indifferent to whether the UCA offers an apology or not. Some may receive an apology in a positive light.

For many, the concept of an apology carries with it assumptions that there be a reconciliation, or a favourable response. However, individuals process harm or trauma at their own pace and in their own time. This requires the acknowledgement that individuals may not be willing to hear an apology due to the level of harm they have experienced. Further, the Task Group recognises that the act of apologising may cause individuals to recall past trauma – thereby be re-traumatised.

Part of the role of the Task Group is to weigh up the benefits that can be attached to making an apology. To this end, the Task Group would be informed by these principles and the responses from those within the LGBTIQ+ community, as well as those from other areas of the Church. This would require the Task Group to be sensitive to the various balances involved as we listen to and consult with the Church in 2022 and 2023.

Offering an apology would be viewed by the Council of the Church as an act of integrity.