

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

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Resolution from the Assembly Standing Committee, July 2022

“To whom might we need to apologise and for what? In exploring this question the task group should consider the SOGICE resolution from the 16th Assembly.”

There are two parts to this question that sit under a broader heading of ‘*what constitutes an apology?*’. Both parts of the question, cannot be answered without addressing the broader context of what constitutes an apology, and by inference, what is *not* an apology. As such, this response to the question will commence with an overview of what constitutes an apology before moving on to briefly answer the two explicit parts of the question: 1) for what are we apologising; and 2) to whom might we need to apologise.

What Constitutes an Apology?

An apology is more than a form of words. It is more than using the words ‘*sorry*’ or ‘*apologise*’ in a statement. Without a deeper understanding of what an apology is, or the implications of offering an apology, offering a form of words can cause more harm and require a further apology.

For an individual to effectively offer an apology, it **MUST** convey empathy. The one offering the apology does not necessarily need to *fully* understand the impact of the wrong that has occurred (though demonstrating at some level an understanding of the harm caused needs to be conveyed); however, they **DO** need to understand the impact of the words offered in the apology and how they may be received.

Empathy is determined by the person receiving the apology. The person receiving the apology needs to be able to say ‘*You get me. You understand why I am hurting and what needs to be done.*’. An apology delivered with empathy is about the other person and the harm that has been done. It is not about the person offering the apology. The person offering the apology is responding to their understanding of – their empathic connection with – the person who has been harmed. The moment we attempt to provide justification for our behaviour, we are no longer acting empathetically, as we have made it about us. We are excusing our behaviour, which does not recognise that our behaviour caused harm. We can, however, note the historical influences and beliefs that caused us to behave in an abusive manner, and name those historical beliefs as causing abuse, rather than contextualising the behaviour as ‘*that’s what we believed back then. We didn’t know any better*’.

An apology, therefore, must start from a place of acknowledging the harm caused to individuals, and unreservedly acknowledging our part in causing that harm. We need to be brutally honest with ourselves. An apology must be linked to our behaviour. To ‘*apologise for the harm caused or experienced*’ is an acknowledgement, not an apology. If we are to apologise, we must link it specifically to our behaviour and outline how our behaviour will change. We cannot apologise for our behaviour, and then tolerate that behaviour in parts of our organisation.

This is expressed in the UCA work around Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts (SOGICE), which is currently underway. The language of the proposal is absolute, with no room to manoeuvre. This is perhaps partly due to the legal nature of the issue. Much of the behaviour for which we are apologising can largely come under SOGICE practices – including exclusion, forced celibacy, and teaching that it is possible to change sexual orientation or gender identity, even when expressed under the guise of pastoral care.

An apology must be similarly absolute, total, and unreserved. That requires total change. There can be no tolerance for what we are apologising. Particularly as it will be inexorably linked with the SOGICE response, which now – at least in some states – has legal ramifications.

An apology is not the place to highlight how much we have changed. Again, in highlighting our journey, and how we have changed, we are making the apology about us. It invites – rather forcefully – the recipient to praise us, the abuser, for our growth, which becomes a further harm for which we will later need to apologise.

If we are to offer an apology that is anything other than the above, we will likely do more harm to many people – particularly those who are still hurting, either because they have lost loved ones, been excluded from fellowships, or been taught to hate themselves through SOGICE practices.

If, however, we are not yet able to offer a total and absolute apology, with no tolerance for the behaviour for which we are apologising, we can acknowledge the harm caused and commit to being on a journey of change. We can guarantee safe havens within our church where individuals can feel safe and secure, noting that the church is working with those who previously caused harm to help them recognise the harm they caused, and to change their behaviour and beliefs. This approach is often referred to as a *‘living apology’*.

This will not satisfy everyone, as there will be many who have been harmed who will question whether we can acknowledge the harm caused whilst not speaking out against those who caused the harm. However, it is a positive step forward that allows further dialogue and sends the message that we are committed to change, and that we do not agree with the views of those who continue to engage in SOGICE practices. It sends the message that as a church, we publicly speak out and denounce the beliefs and practices – including so-called pastoral care and theology – which is now understood to constitute SOGICE practices, and that SOGICE practices have no place in our faith community.

Whether we offer an *‘apology’*, or a *‘living apology’* will depend on:

- a) Whether the intended recipients have worked through their pain to a place of healing. Those who have worked through their pain and arrived at a place of healing may be able to understand and accept the intent of an apology, even if it is not absolute. They are likely to be better able to recognise that the political within an organisation, and that the political process is slow, measured in millimetre increments rather than steps forward. Such recipients are perhaps more likely to accept an apology that is not absolute.
- b) Whether the intended recipients are still in pain. Those still in pain are unlikely to view an apology that is not absolute, total, and unreserved, and is not accompanied by both restitution and penalties for those who still engage in SOGICE practices, as anything other than further abuse, for which we will need to later apologise –

effectively apologising for our apology. In which case, a *'living apology'* is more likely the wiser way forward.

- c) The outcome of the SOGICE discussion within the wider community. If SOGICE practices are criminalised, we will have no choice but to offer an absolute apology with no tolerance for SOGICE practices in any form.

The resolution from the 16th Assembly states:

- a) Affirm the Uniting Church Statement, Dignity in Humanity, which states that 'every person is precious and entitled to live with dignity because they are God's children'.
- b) Affirm that prayer and pastoral care are long-held Christian practices that will continue to be offered to support and uphold people, including LGBTIQ+ people, and agree that these Christian practices should not be used to harm or condemn any people including LGBTIQ+ people.
- c) Recognise that sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts (SOGICE) are harmful to people's mental health and wellbeing.
- d) Request the Assembly Standing Committee to develop a process to provide a national resource for congregations, agencies, and individuals to learn how they can help prevent harm from SOGICE ideology and practice.

This requires recognising that theological teaching, preaching, and pastoral care that suggests LGBTQ+ individuals are either broken or can change are SOGICE practices and not God honouring. Accepting the SOGICE statement, or simply recognising the wisdom within the SOGICE statement, leaves no room for tolerance of SOGICE practices. We cannot enact the above resolution without totally rejecting SOGICE practices, or tolerating such practices from members within the church. This is at the heart of what constitutes an apology, and speaks to both what we are apologising for, and to whom we are apologising.

For What Are We Offering an Apology?

An initial response may be to say that we are apologising for the harm caused by past actions. However, that does not identify what harm was caused, nor does it identify what caused the harm. Understanding and acknowledging the specific harm that has been caused will inform the question of *'to whom are we apologising'*. It is important to articulate the harm that was caused to show that we *'get it'*. We are taking responsibility for the consequences of the actions and naming those consequences. This includes, to name a few:

- Loss of income due to the impact of work or loss of work because of the harm caused
- Contribution to poor and ongoing mental health – including often years of psychological and psychiatric interventions at all levels
- Physical pain through self-harming practices
- Suicides
- Bereavements of family and friends
- Exclusion from fellowships of LGBTQ+ individuals, their families, friends, and allies
- Rejection of vulnerable people
- Causing people to lose their faith
- The breakup of families and relationships

We then need to identify specifically the actions that have led to the identified harm. In short, this involves recognising that the actions of the church that have caused the harm, and naming them as SOGICE practices, as articulated in the SOGICE statement. This includes teaching from the pulpit and pastoral conversations aimed at affirming the traditional view of

binary sexuality, cis-gender, and heterosexual expression, as well as ideology and practices which exclude LGBTQA+ individuals from leadership or community.

In demonstrating our understanding of the wider impact of past actions, we then need to apologise for our part in encouraging and perpetuating societal beliefs and attitudes that have caused harm, as noted in the SOGICE Statement.

To Whom Might We Need to Apologise?

This may at first glance appear to be a simple question. We apologise to the LGBTQA+ community. However, this assumes that the only people impacted by the past abuse of the UCA are members of the LGBTQA+ community. However, there are multiple parties that have been harmed, and to whom an apology is due:

- People in the LGBTQA+ community who have left the UCA and those who are still within the UCA. These are to be treated differently as they are likely to have experienced the abuse and harm differently. Many have required ongoing therapy, have had difficulty with relationships, with maintaining employment, or may have even self-harmed due to experiencing SOGICE practices.
- Families, friends, and Allies of LGBTQA+ individuals who have experienced bereavement, exclusion, and pain because of the pain of their loved ones. They have experienced their own pain, their own exclusion, their own harm.
- Our own members for not representing Christ faithfully, often encouraging our members to perpetrate harm.
- It could be argued that we need to apologise to the wider community for not representing Christ faithfully, leading the wider community in the past to vilify and harm members of the LGBTQA+ community, their family, friends, and allies. The SOGICE statement notes that the teaching of religious organisations have informed and led to abuse being perpetrated by the wider community, including shaping community attitudes.