



Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY
Assembly Standing Committee

10-12 November 2023

DOCUMENT 15

Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	For Information, Discussion and Decision
Title	Apology to LGBTIQ Australians Task Group
Assembly or ASC Minute	<p>July 2023 ASC Minutes:</p> <p>23.31.02 request the Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group to develop the words of an apology, in consultation with LGBTIQA+ members of the Uniting Church; and to bring a draft to the November 2023 meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee;</p> <p>23.31.03 request the Transforming Worship Panel, in consultation with the Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group, to develop a liturgy that includes lament, confession and a statement of welcome of LGBTIQA+ people in the Uniting Church, and the apology, that would be offered at the 17th Assembly, and could be adapted for use in other parts of the Church; for approval by the Assembly Standing Committee no later than March 2024;</p> <p>23.31.04 request the President to work with the Moderators to offer an apology to the LGBTIQA+ Australians and their families within the bounds of each Synod following the 17th Assembly;</p> <p>23.31.05 request the Transforming Worship Panel, in consultation with LGBTIQA+ members of the Uniting Church and the Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group, to develop a resource for offering a personal apology to individuals and families for the silence, rejection, discrimination and stereotyping of LGBTIQA+ people; for approval by the Assembly Standing Committee no later than March 2024;</p> <p>23.31.06 request the General Secretary to:</p> <p>23.31.07 a) commission the development of resources for trauma informed pastoral care, including trauma informed pastoral care of LGBTIQA+ people, b) further develop resources about inclusive language as it relates to gender identity and promote these resources across the Uniting Church, and c) explore the option of publishing all reports, papers and decisions made by the Uniting Church on human sexuality;</p> <p>23.31.08 request the General Secretary to develop a communications plan for the whole church regarding this work; and</p> <p>23.31.09 approve the Assembly Officers to appoint additional members to the Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group, if required</p>
Consultation	

Purpose	To update the ASC on the work of the Task Group in response to the resolutions of the March and July 2023 ASC meetings, specifically the Task Group's advice on developing the words of an apology.
Rationale & Findings Summary	
Attachments	Attachment 1 – Draft Proposals, and Background and Rationale for the seventeenth Assembly.
Recommendations	That the Assembly Standing Committee: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Receive the report. 2. Advise the Task Group of the ASC's response to the words of a living apology and other draft proposals for the seventeenth Assembly. 3. Note the planned consultation with LGBTIQA+ people on 28 November. 4. Delay a final decision on the Task Group's Proposals until after receiving a report from the 28 November consultation. 5. Request the Task Group to provide a report on the consultation not later than [ASC TO PROVIDE DATE]
Submitted by	Lin Hatfield Dodds, Convenor

Report from the Apology Task Group

This report to the ASC responds to the decisions of the March and July 2023 ASC meetings.

1. The March 2023 ASC meeting requested the Task Group to pause its activities to allow time for the President to engage in conversations with a range of people affected by the work of the Task Group.
2. The Convenor met with the President and General Secretary on 6 September and the decisions of the July 2023 ASC meeting were discussed.
3. The Task Group was re-convened in 17 October 2023 when the Group was able to consider the July 2023 decisions. The meeting focussed on the one decision which was specifically directed to the Task Group, namely:
 2. *request the Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group to develop the words of an apology, in consultation with LGBTIQA+ members of the Uniting Church; and to bring a draft to the November 2023 meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee;* (ASC Minutes, July 2023)
4. The Task Group meeting considered a threshold issue, namely two possible approaches to offering “an apology”. These are:
 - (1) A content-based formal “full apology”; and
 - (2) A process-based “living apology”.

A formal and *full apology* would say sorry for specific harmful and discriminatory actions or failures to act (past and present), specify changes to policies and actions in the future, and consider reparations. Our view is that the 2024 Assembly is unlikely to reach consensus on reversing what the Task Group regards as discriminatory Uniting Church policies on ordination and marriage.

Task Group member Graeme Randall summarises the risk of a full apology as follows:

...to offer an apology for the harm caused by the church, but then maintain as valid the right for a congregation and members to hold a position that marriage is only between a man and a woman, that people who are LGBTIQ+ can be excluded from leadership in some congregations, and teach that being LGBTIQ+ is sinful, would do immeasurable harm and invalidate any apology that could be offered.

A *living apology* would acknowledge the harm, exclusion and stigma faced by LGBTIQA+ people in the Uniting Church, and would commit to a process, structure and resourcing over a period of time to respond to the harm. Unlike a full apology, a Living Apology seeks consensus on a process of living together even though there continues to be different convictions held on sexuality and gender identity. Advice from LGBTIQA+ people would be crucial to a living apology process. The proposal to the 2018 Assembly, and the Terms of Reference for the Task Group, refer specifically to the option of a living apology.

On terminology, a full apology is something which would be offered by the Assembly. A living apology is something that the Assembly would commit to. The Task Group is of the view that the best course of action in 2024 would be for the Assembly to commit to a living apology process. Specific possible proposals and a background and rationale are provided at Attachment One.

5. If the ASC decides to not take a proposal for a Living Apology to the Seventeenth Assembly, the Task Group strongly advises against proceeding with what we have described as a formal and full apology. In our view such a course of action would inflict further harm on the people the Church is seeking to make an apology to.
6. If the ASC decides to not take a proposal for a Living Apology to the Seventeenth Assembly, the Task Group still sees value in the establishment of a LGBTIQA+ Reference Group to

assist the Church as the Church continues to consider matters relating to sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex variations.

7. The October meeting of the Task Group agreed to proceed with a consultation for LGBTIQA+ people in the life of the Uniting Church. In practical terms this was not possible to be held between the re-convened meeting of the Task Group and the preparation of this report. The consultation will be held on Tuesday 28 November via Zoom with a written report being prepared in early December. The consultation has been promoted in a narrow cast fashion, i.e., through Uniting Network, open and affirming congregations, and specific facebook pages. Two chaplains have been appointed to attend the consultation and be available for pastoral conversations as required including after the consultation.

Lin Hatfield Dodds
Convenor, Apology Task Group
6 November 2023

Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group

5 November 2023

DRAFT – possible Proposals to Assembly 2024:

That the Assembly:

1. Receive the report.
2. Commit to a “Living Apology” to LGBTIQA+ people guided by the following foundations:
 - 2.1 The dignity and equality of all people, created in the image of God;
 - 2.2 That this God-given dignity extends to all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and physiological sex characteristics;
 - 2.3 The inclusion of LGBTIQA+ people in all aspects of a living apology process;
 - 2.4 Use of a trauma-based framework which does not engage in activities which contribute to further trauma and abuse;
 - 2.5 Encouraging various Uniting Church Councils and agencies to participate in the living apology process;
 - 2.6 Continuing reflection on biblical and theological perspectives concerning sexuality, gender identity and expression, and physiological sex characteristics, including the perspectives of queer theology; and
 - 2.7 The importance of the development and use of appropriate liturgical resources which recognise that the church has been an active participant in the stigma, prejudice and discrimination faced by LGBTIQA+ people.
3. Establish a LGBTIQA+ Reference Group to provide advice on the living apology process and any other matters concerning LGBTIQA+ people in the life of the Uniting Church as decided by the Assembly or the Assembly Standing Committee.
4. Request the Assembly Standing Committee to develop and approve Terms of Reference for the Reference Group, noting the work of the Apology Task Group.

Background and rationale

Please note: this is a DRAFT working document to be further developed. It gives some indication of discussions in the Task Group over the past three years. Further work will integrate material from other documents the Task Group has provided to the ASC. In addition, it will be further developed following the LGBTIQA+ consultation on 28 November 2023.

1. The Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group was established in 2019 and commenced meeting in October 2020 under the convenorship of Lin Hatfield Dodds. The Task Group has reported regularly and been responsive to several requests from the Assembly Standing Committee. Specific meetings and discussions have been held during the past three years including with the Uniting Church LGBTIQA+ Network, a local rainbow congregation, individual non-binary Church members, the Interim Chairperson of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, the consultant for CALD national conferences, Synod Moderators, and theologians.
2. The proposal has arisen from those discussions and the deliberations of the Task Group members. Task Groups member have backgrounds in local church ministry, clinical psychology, health and community services, LGBTIQA+ ministry and advocacy, social policy and social justice. Five of the eight members of the Task Group identify as part of the LGBTIQA+ communities and this has shaped the thinking of the Group. In its own life the

Task Group has demonstrated the constructive ways in which LGBTIQ+ people and allies can work together.

3. The Terms of Reference for the Task Group are attached. It is noted that the possibility of a living apology was included in the Background and Rationale submitted to the Fifteenth Assembly in 2018 and specifically included in the Terms of Reference approved by the ASC in 2019. (Attach)
4. Some church members are at times not certain about what seems to be the constantly changing acronym, currently LGBTIQ+. (MORE, and Reference.)
5. The Task Group's work on biblical and theological perspectives. (MORE. Reference.)
6. The Task Group has examined apologies offered by other churches in Australia and overseas. (Reference.) This has led to the firm conclusion that offering the words of a formal and full apology in isolation from concrete actions to change policies and procedures is hollow at best and likely to cause further harm including re-traumatising already abused individuals. (Reference.) This has been a major consideration in the Task Group's support for a Living Apology. In addition, we note that at least one of our partner churches, the United Church of Canada, decided to commit to a Living Apology process, despite having made very good specific policy changes in 1988 and subsequently.
7. In addition to examining the actions of other churches the Task Group has considered evidence from clinical practice about the harm caused to people. (MORE and reference.)
8. At this point in time the Uniting Church has made clear commitments to a diversity of policy and practice with regard to sexuality, gender identity and expression, and physiological sex characteristics (ie intersex variations). This diversity is correctly described as one of the strengths of the Uniting Church with a focus on the unity found in our commitment to Christ and the Gospel. From the perspective of many LGBTIQ+ people this unity and diversity has been achieved at a considerable price in terms of justice and the hope for lasting reconciliation. LGBTIQ+ people believe that sexuality, gender identity and expression, and physiological sex characteristics should be treated by the Uniting Church in Australia in the same way that race and sex are treated. That is, local churches and presbyteries are not permitted to exclude members, applicants for specified ministries, or placements solely on the grounds of race or sex (and, we hope, other situations such as disability, age, etc).
9. The same thinking applies to marriage. LGBTIQ+ people strongly object to the fact that ordained Ministers and Church Councils can refuse an otherwise eligible couple the celebration of marriage solely on grounds of their sexuality, gender identity and expression or physiological sex characteristics. The Task Group believes that the Assembly would not be able to reach consensus on moving beyond the status quo of diversity in 2024, and that a proposal to do so (as would be required by a full and formal apology) would unhelpfully contribute to division in the church and potentially set back efforts to become more inclusive.
10. That said, the overall effect of Assembly decisions since the first and prescient decision of the ASC on sexuality (November 1982, has contributed to the creation of a small but growing number safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ people and affirming congregations. (Reference). Likewise, the decision of the Fifteenth Assembly (2018) with regard to marriage created spaces for those clergy and Church Councils who wished to celebrate the marriage of two people without regard for sex, gender, or sexual orientation. A commitment to a Living Apology continues the practice of opening safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ people to participate more fully in the life and witness of the Uniting Church in Australia.
11. A commitment by the Assembly to a Living Apology does not preclude some other Councils of the Church offering an apology to LGBTIQ+ people. For example, a number of congregations and presbyteries may already be able to reach consensus on a formal and full apology which would: (a) say sorry for specific harmful and discriminatory actions or failures to act (past and present); (b) specify changes to policies and actions in the future; and (c)

consider reparations. Such local or regional apologies would be specific to the Council involved cognisant their responsibilities with due regard for the Regulations of the Church.

12. During discussions in the past three years, and the proposed commitment to a Living Apology, it has become apparent that there is a need for LGBTIQA+ people to be officially recognised and to have formal input in the ongoing life of the Uniting Church. This will be important if a Living Apology commitment is to be followed through at least until the Eighteenth Assembly in 2027. In addition, there are other issues which may arise from time to time which would benefit from the existence of a national reference group. For example, The Task Group is conscious of the particular needs of trans, gender diverse, non-binary and intersex people which have received very little specific attention in the 42 years since the Assembly commenced discussion of sexuality in 1981. In addition, at the national level, the issue of religious discrimination continues to be under consideration by the Australian Parliament with potentially adverse consequences for LGBTIQA+ people. As with the Apology Task Group there would be considerable value in a Reference Group engaging with allies.
13. A decision concerning a Living Apology does not preclude a 'Statement of commitment' or an appropriate liturgy to be observed at the 2024 Assembly. A liturgy might include elements of (a) lament for the church's role in the stigma, prejudice and exclusion faced by many LGBTIQA+ people; (b) thanksgiving for the lives and contributions of LGBTIQA+ individuals, couples, and families; and (c) prayers for future commitments. Consistent with the seven 'foundations' as outlined above, this liturgy should not be worded or seen as a confession or apology. The Task Group believes that that challenge lies beyond 2024.

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