

***Confidential***



**Uniting Church in Australia**  
**ASSEMBLY**  
Assembly Standing Committee

**21 April 2024**

**DOCUMENT 5**

Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	For Decision
Title	Apology to LGBTIQ Australians Task Group
Assembly or ASC Minute	Decisions from ASC meeting, December 2023.
Consultation	
Purpose	To provide the ASC with the Task Group's final report, both a full version and a summary version.
Rationale & Findings Summary	
Attachments	Attachment 1 – Final Report – Summary Attachment 2 – Final Report - Full
Recommendations	That the Assembly Standing Committee:  <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Receive the Task Group's Final report, noting both the full and summary versions.</li><li>2. Note that the full report is intended for ASC members only, and not for wider distribution.</li><li>3. Decide to provide the summary report to Assembly members for their information. (The final report has no proposals. That has been left to the ASC to determine.)</li></ol>
Submitted by	Lin Hatfield Dodds, Convenor

# ***Together in Community***

## **Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group**

### **Final Report - Summary**

April 2024

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#### **Introduction**

I am very pleased to provide the final report of the Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group to the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC). (The acronym 'LGBTIQA+' refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, asexual and plus people.) The Task Group has met on 31 occasions since our first meeting in October 2020, plus various subgroup meetings. This has been an intense and rewarding journey as Task Group members have got to know each other and worked through important matters for our Church – and the lives of our siblings who are part of the LGBTIQA+ communities.

Task Group 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 LGBTIQA+ people and allies can work together.

Finally the Task Group thanks the ASC for the opportunity to serve the church in this capacity. Our hope for the future is that the Uniting Church will one day celebrate the gifts and graces of our LGBTIQA+ members, and that we might live together in community. The *Basis of Union* reminds us that we can only be “a fellowship of reconciliation” (para. 3) by trusting in God’s sovereign grace.

Lin Hatfield Dodds

CONVENOR

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## Background and overview

At the Fifteenth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) in 2018, two members submitted a proposal that the Assembly establish a process leading to an apology to LGBTIQ+ people “for the Church’s role in the silence, rejection, discrimination and stereotyping of LGBTIQ people”.<sup>i</sup> Due to timing, that was not dealt with by the Assembly. In 2019 the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) resolved to appoint a Task Group with the purpose of “develop[ing] 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>ii</sup> (Members of the Group are listed at the end.)

The Task Group has not achieved the stated purpose, namely to “develop the wording of an official apology”. The overall reason is that after discussions, research and consultations, the members of the Task Group concluded that to offer a formal official apology now would: (a) cause more harm to LGBTIQ+ people; and (b) not assist the Uniting Church in a greater engagement and ministry with LGBTIQ+ communities.

The group also concluded that the most helpful way forward would be through the process of a ‘living apology’, as explained below. At this stage, however, the Group has not made specific proposals about a living apology but hope that will be considered in the context of wider Assembly decisions about the best way to engage with LGBTIQ+ people in the future.

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**James:** *An apology that lives out the celebration and recognition of our feminine, queer, and different bodies, might shift direction, and allow for those who are ready and able, to reach again to the margins of who we are, to find the sheep who we might be missing because we have not always been who we said we would be.*

**Wendy:** *An apology without action could do more harm than good to the LGBTIQ+ community... The idea of a living apology seeks to address these concerns. If we want to continue to be a church that celebrates and welcomes diversity, we need to keep building on the steps we have achieved so far and be open to learning and growth in this space.*

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## Main activities

Since October 2020 the Task Group has engaged in the following activities. Many have taken place at regular monthly meetings though several additional meetings have also been held.

- Meeting with theologians to consider biblical and theological matters, and the Basis of Union.
- Develop pastoral principles to guide the work of the group and the wider church when considering LGBTIQ+ matters.
- Research on what actions have been taken regarding an apology to LGBTIQ+ people by other churches.
- Consideration of different ways to understand an apology.

- Meeting with UAICC interim Chairperson; Assembly consultant on national conferences; Uniting Vic/Tas on their LGBTIQA+ policies and procedures.
- ACT based members participated in a worship service with the Rainbow Christian Alliance at Tuggeranong Congregation.
- Open consultation with Uniting Church LGBTIQA+ people.
- Meetings with the President and General Secretary; meeting with the Synod Moderators; attending and reporting at ASC meetings.

Detailed papers on some of the above areas are filed with the Assembly office, and available if there is future work undertaken in this area by the Assembly.

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**Mikali:** *My experience of the Uniting Church, as a young, transgender person, has been for the vast part welcoming and safe... I look forward to having relationships across our church that expose all our members to the beauty of queer people and the gift that we bring.*

**Elizabeth:** *Whilst there is much to celebrate about our church's position (affirming queer clergy and allowing ministers to marry same gendered couples are two examples) there is still a lot of work to be done on educating people about the active discrimination and injustice that still permeates part of our church, and the harm that this causes to all of our LGBTIQA+ friends.*

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### ***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 LGBTIQA+ people. We have collaborated with forces that sought to oppress, or to change, LGBTIQA+ people, and we have allowed the continuation of discriminatory practices and the repetition of damaging words.

From early considerations the Task Group was aware of two questions which need to be answered: (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.

Early in the life of the Task Group four guiding principles were agreed. They are:

- (1) *Ensure no avoidable harm to individuals results from processes recommended to the Assembly.*
- (2) *Respect agency and autonomy of all involved in the apology process.*
- (3) *Work towards health, embracing pain as part of the healing process.*
- (4) *Hear and validate people's stories as a key element in developing an Apology.*

As the work progressed to 2023, the Task Group formed a strong evidence-based view that an official apology to LGBTIQA+ people from the Uniting Church must be trauma informed and accompanied by skilled and accessible pastoral supports and practical responses to the persons to whom the apology will be addressed. These are currently not in place throughout the Uniting Church.

During 2023 the Task Group gradually clarified that there could be two possible approaches to offering “an apology”. These are described as:

- (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. We reached the conclusion that the 2024 Assembly is unlikely to achieve consensus on reversing what the Task Group regards as discriminatory Uniting Church policies on ordination and marriage.

The Task Group examined apologies offered by other churches in Australia and overseas. Invariably they read somewhat hollow, as many of the churches offering a formal apology have continued discriminatory practices, thereby perpetuating what is being apologised for. We noted 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.

In addition to pastoral considerations, this has led the Task Group 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. This became the major consideration in the Task Group’s conclusion to support a living apology.

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**Apelu:** *My family and I joined the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) when we arrived in Australia, from Samoa, in the mid-1990s due largely to its commitment to be a Church for kinds of Christians... Life with God, according to the Christian tradition, is not for a select few, but for all who have faith in Jesus Christ.*

**Warren:** *As a veteran of the Assembly Sexuality Task Group in the 1990s, the Apology Task Group has been low key and free from external attacks. There has been progress in our Church. A living apology would assist as we seek to live out a vision to welcome and celebrate LGBTIQA+ lives in faithfulness to the Good News of Christ Jesus.*

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### **LGBTIQA+ consultation**

Towards the end of our work we facilitated an open consultation with members of the Uniting Church LGBTIQA+ communities. A report on the consultation has been provided to the ASC. In addition to a range of specific comments and lived experiences concerning the Uniting Church, there was no support by those attending for a formal apology and some reasonable support for a living apology. One comment which resonated in terms of how the Uniting Church might approach its future engagement with LGBTIQA+ was:

*I am not happy to be described in terms of shame and hurt. We are not a problem! There is a need for affirming the gifts of queer people in terms of education, formation, resourcing and empowering.*

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**Graeme:** *The teaching of the church [I used to be a member of] meant that I spent more than half my life hating myself and cursing God for being gay... My time on the TG has taught me that there is a long way to go in the UCA before it is ready to offer an apology. But it has also taught me that there is movement.*

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## **Biblical and theological issues**

The Task Group was conscious in doing its work that there continues to be diverse views in the Uniting Church in matters of human sexuality and gender identity. Our thinking was grounded in the theological considerations of a comprehensive statement from the Assembly in 2006 titled “Dignity in Humanity”. The statement declares that:

*...the Uniting Church believes that every person is precious and entitled to live with dignity because they are God’s children, and that each person’s life and rights need to be protected or the human community (and its reflection of God) and all people are diminished.* <sup>iii</sup>

The Task Group’s specific work focused on three areas (for which papers have been provided to the Assembly):

- (a) The fundamental goodness of God’s creation, made in the image of God, which includes the diversity of people in terms of gender identity and express, sexual orientation, and physiological sex characteristics. 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>iv</sup>
- (b) Major themes in the *Basis of Union*, notably calls to be a fellowship of reconciliation, and reliance on the sovereign grace of God-in-Christ.
- (c) Scriptural texts who uphold inclusive approaches to community and faith; and those that have been used to exclude and reject LGBTIQ+ people.

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**Lin:** *I love the UCA. I love our vision, and I love how we live it out in so many diverse ways across this vast continent... If we are serious about every person being formed in the image of God, then we must be serious about loving and celebrating each person, as they are, in their wholeness... A living apology is a part of the pathway for that journey. I hope and pray that that’d be the path we walk down, together with Christ.*

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## **Conclusion**

Task Group members thank the church for the opportunity to serve in this way. It has been a time of learning, understanding differences, expressing disappointments and sharing hopes for the future of LGBTIQ+ people in the Church. Our work has been but one of many steps the Uniting Church has taken over more than forty years to reconsider matters of gender identity and sexuality. The Task Group sees a role for a living apology in the next steps, along with a developing sense of pride, continuing and strengthening the Church’s welcome of our LGBTIQ+ siblings.

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## Members of the Task Group

*Revd James Aaron* is a Minister in service with Pulse, Synod of NSW/ACT, facilitating ministry with young adults. Willoughby Uniting Church, NSW.

*Mikali Anagnostis* works a gardener and social support worker and writes music with the sacred arts collective, Marion St. Leichhardt Uniting Church, on Gadigal/Wangal Country NSW.

*Lin Hatfield Dodds* (Convenor) is CEO of the Benevolent Society and former National Director of UnitingCare Australia. Kippax Uniting Church, ACT.

*Wendy Hendry* is Executive Officer, Communications, with the Synod of WA, and a former Convenor of Uniting Network Australia. Margaret River Uniting Church, WA.

*Revd Elizabeth Raine* is a retired Minister in the UCA and part of the Dungog congregation, NSW. She worked closely with the Rainbow Christian Alliance in her last congregation.

*Graeme Randall* is a registered psychologist, working in counselling and therapy for over 25 years; including with clients concerning child-related sexual offences. Leichhardt Uniting Church, NSW.

*Warren Talbot* (Secretary) works for the Wellspring Community, former Executive Director of LGBTIQ+ Health Australia. Pitt Street Uniting Church, on Gadigal Land, NSW.

*Revd Apelu Tielu* is Minister of the Queanbeyan Uniting Church, NSW, and is writing a PhD on theology and migration.

*With thanks and appreciation to former members:* Revd Leanne Jencki, Revd Gordon Ramsay, Revd Sani Vaeluaga.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Revd Peter Weeks and Revd Ric Morrell, Proposal to the Fifteen Assembly, Assembly Papers, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Assembly Standing Committee, July 2019.

<sup>iii</sup> “Dignity in Humanity: Recognising Christ in Every Person”, in Elenie Poulos and Cynthia Coghill, *For a World Reconciled: Justice Statements from the Uniting Church in Australia, 1977-2015*, Sydney, 2016, page 127.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. Pages 6,7.

# ***Together in Community***

## **Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group**

### **Final Report**

April 2024

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## **Members of the Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group**

**Revd James Aaron** is a Minister in service with the Synod of NSW ACT working within the Pulse team as the Young Adult Ministry Facilitator, serving alongside our young peoples' ministries. James lives on Bidjigal lands in Sydney and worships in his home congregation at Willoughby Uniting Church.

**Mikali Anagnostis** is a member of Leichhardt Uniting Church, on Gadigal/Wangal Country. They have participated in campaigns to mobilise the Uniting Church for climate, First Nations and LGBTIQA+ justice. Mikali works as a gardener and social support worker and writes music with the sacred arts collective, Marion St.

**Lin Hatfield Dodds** (Convenor) is CEO of The Benevolent Society. Lin has a background as a counselling psychologist. She is a past National Director of UnitingCare Australia and a Deputy Secretary in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Lin is a member of Kippax Uniting Church, ACT.

**Wendy Hendry** (she/her) works for the Uniting Church WA Synod as the Executive Officer, Communications, and previously as Social Justice Officer. She is past convenor of Equal Voices WA, and past co-convenor of Uniting Network Australia. Wendy is also a Commonwealth Authorised Marriage Celebrant. Wendy worships with the Social Justice Church community in Perth and is a member of the Margaret River Uniting Church, WA.

**Revd Elizabeth Raine** is a retired Minister in the UCA and part of the Dungog congregation, NSW. She has worked closely with the Rainbow Christian Alliance in her last congregation and in many joint ventures with LGBTIQA+ colleagues across her ministry.

**Graeme Randall** is a registered psychologist and has worked in counselling and therapy for over 25 years. Since 2017 Graeme has worked with clients who have been charged, convicted, or are at risk of committing a child-related sexual offence. Graeme is a member of Leichhardt Uniting Church, NSW.

**Warren Talbot** (Secretary) works for the *Wellspring Community*. He is a former Executive Director of the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, and LGBTIQ+ Health Australia. Warren is a member of Pitt Street Uniting Church, NSW, on Gadigal land.

**Revd Apelu Tielu** is Minister at the Queanbeyan Uniting Church, NSW. Originally from Samoa, Apelu is researching a PhD on theology and migration.

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*The Task Group wishes to thank three former members of the Group who contributed considerably to our development and thinking: Revd Leanne Jenski, Revd Gordon Ramsay, and the Revd Sani Vaeluaga.*

## Introduction

I am very pleased to provide the final report of the Apology to LGBTIQA+ Australians Task Group to the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC). (The acronym 'LGBTIQA+' refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, asexual and plus people.) The Task Group has met on 31 occasions since our first meeting in October 2020, plus various subgroup meetings. This has been an intense and rewarding journey as Task Group members have got to know each other and worked through important matters for our Church – and the lives of our siblings who are part of the LGBTIQA+ communities.

Task Group members 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 LGBTIQA+ people and allies can work together.

The report is longer than previously advised. On reflection it seemed important to have a reasonably comprehensive overview of work undertaken in order to fully assist and inform those who may pick up and follow through on parts of this work in the future. At our second last meeting the idea emerged in discussion that as the work was drawing to a conclusion, each member of the Task Group would provide a personal reflection on what they had learnt through the process and some hopes for the future. This has added to the length. But, far more importantly, the personal reflections provide valuable insights into the thoughts and lived experience of individuals.

Finally, the Task Group thanks the ASC for the opportunity to serve the church in this capacity. Our hope for the future is that the Uniting Church will one day celebrate the gifts and graces of our LGBTIQA+ members, and that we might live together in community. The *Basis of Union* reminds us that we can only be “a fellowship of reconciliation” (para. 3) by trusting in God’s sovereign grace.

Lin Hatfield Dodds

CONVENOR

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### **James**

*It is often the case within the church and society that queer and feminine bodies and minds have been the vessels for people to place their prejudice, hate, fear, punishment and condemnation. As a Uniting Church we have often declared that it is at the margins, the places where Jesus would walk today; we would offer our own hands and feet and voices to the witness of that Christ at the edge (to the least of these). We celebrate our diversity in so very many ways, and it is incredible to be a part of such a vibrant and inclusive church.*

*With all the work that has been done, I, in all my queerness am afforded a place and privilege to serve and worship in many places within this Church. However, the cost on the*

*bodies, including my own in sometimes blatant and sometimes far less blatant ways, has been sacrifice and judgement. Has for many people meant they could not be themselves. The subtleties of our language, and the dialogue we have engaged in talking about sex and sexuality, marriage debates, and queer bodies has damaged the way we engage with Queer people, naming the topic an issue before recognising that the people that bring a diversity and voice that might proclaim an expression of who God that is true, legitimate, and right to be celebrated. An apology that lives out the celebration and recognition of our feminine, queer, and different bodies, might shift direction, and allow for those who are ready and able, to reach again to the margins of who we are, to find the sheep who we might be missing because we have not always been who we said we would be.*

\*

### **Wendy**

*I was invited to join the Task Group part way through the process. I was interested in being involved in, and contributing to, a potentially important milestone for our church. Having witnessed the best and worst of our church through years of discussions about the recognition of LGBTIQ clergy, and the possibility of marriage equality debates, the idea that our church could take a strong position in an apology to the LGBTIQ community was intriguing. However, as we worked through what it would mean for a church to make an apology statement, it was also clear that the work would need to be done to carry the rest of the church along with us. Simply, an apology without action could do more harm than good to the LGBTIQ community. The idea of a living apology seeks to address these concerns.*

*I have always felt like I have a place in the Uniting Church. However, when we look below the surface there are still many areas of our church where inclusion is not freely offered. If we want to continue to be a church that celebrates and welcomes diversity, we need to keep building on the steps we have achieved so far and be open to learning and growth in this space. I hope the Assembly will embrace the concept of a living apology and resource an Assembly circle and continue to work on what it means to be an inclusive church that truly embraces and celebrates diversity.*

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## Background and overview

At the Fifteenth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) in 2018, two members submitted a proposal that the Assembly establish a process leading to an apology to LGBTIQ+ people “for the Church’s role in the silence, rejection, discrimination and stereotyping of LGBTIQ people”.<sup>i</sup>

The rationale for the proposal stated as follows:

*Until quite recently, in Western societies such as Australia, LGBTIQ people have been regarded with a high degree of official and unofficial rejection and exclusion. This was seen legally where male homosexuality was a criminal offense, medically where it was treated as a serious mental illness, socially where individuals were ostracised and discriminated against, and religiously where the near universal view equated homosexuality with sin and evil. Transgender and other gender diverse people have rarely been illegal but widespread ignorance has led to ostracism, rejection, ridicule and medical negligence. Intersex variation has been often unknown or, when known, individuals subject to cruel and damaging surgeries often at an early age.*

*Churches have participated in this general opprobrium in numerous ways. Fortunately this is gradually changing as society becomes more educated concerning LGBTIQ people, and as LGBTIQ people themselves have made decisions to ‘come out’ and claim their rightful place as full citizens in society.<sup>ii</sup>*

The rationale concluded with the following words: “The best apology might be a “living apology” though this does not preclude a formal statement by the Assembly in 2021.”<sup>iii</sup>

In 2019 the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) resolved to appoint a Task Group with the following purpose:

*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>iv</sup>*

Three tasks were required of the Group:

- 1. Consult widely with LGBTIQ and other members of the Church in order 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. When considering this, the task group will 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.*
- 2. If timing is appropriate, bring a proposal regarding an apology to the 16th Assembly. The best apology might be a “living apology” though this does not preclude a formal statement by the Assembly.*
- 3. The apology might draw on, but not go beyond, existing statements, decisions and theological work that has been approved by either the Assembly or ASC in the past.<sup>v</sup>*

The complete Terms of Reference are I included at Appendix One.

It will be apparent that the Task Group has not achieved the stated purpose, namely to “develop the wording of an official apology”. The overall reason is that after discussions, research and consultations, the Task Group concluded that to offer an official apology now would: (a) cause more harm to LGBTIQA+ people; and (b) not assist the Uniting Church in a greater engagement and ministry with LGBTIQA+ communities.

Importantly, while central to our understanding and expression of the faith, confession, repentance and renewal – considered in the context of an apology - are very difficult. They confront us with our own reality; at times we would prefer this was not the case. These all take time and may be best understood by way of considering times of preparation, death, resurrection and response. As an Easter faith experience is often made more significant by a time of Lenten preparation, and that this in turn can lead to an ongoing life of deeper connection with the life-giving presence of the Spirit, so too the work the Task Group may be best assessed as a form of deep preparation in the hope of a relationally-based renewal as its ongoing outcome.

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#### *A note on terminology*

Some readers may be uncertain about the terminology being used, both on the grounds that it seems to be regularly changing and expanding, and that different groups use different variations of the acronym “LGBTIQA+” – lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, asexual and plus. We are using “LGBTIQA+” as perhaps the most comprehensive term to recognise the diversity of people who identify as being of a different sexual orientations (lesbian, gay, bisexual), gender identity and expression (transgender, gender diverse and non-binary people), and physiological sex characteristics (people with intersex variations). Occasionally ‘queer’ is used as an alternative to ‘LGBTIQA+’. When quoting other documents, the acronym used in those documents has not been changed.

\*

#### ***Mikali***

*My experience of the Uniting Church, as a young, transgender person, has been for the vast part welcoming and safe. It has been a refuge from other churches with harmful ideologies. In being a part of the task group, I started to learn about the reality of our broader Uniting Church and the way queer people are treated within it; it has been surprising and disappointing. The lack of receptivity to the task group’s final recommendation, of a living apology, has taught me how difficult it really is to share a church with people who are radically different from yourself. I’ve learnt that in attempting to give everyone a place at the table, we can give hatred a legitimacy it does not deserve. I have been energised by the patience and perseverance of the queer members of the committee who have fought ignorance and hatred their whole lives. Their grace with the church and commitment to continue this work gives me hope. It is my hope that our church can one day stand up for those within it who are denigrated. I look forward to having relationships across our church that expose all our members to the beauty of queer people and the gift that we bring.*

\*

## **Elizabeth**

*I joined this group with high hopes that the UCA was on the right track in wishing to apologise for harm from church practices and beliefs had caused to LGBTQI+ people. I am very disappointed that the Assembly leadership of our church still seems to not want to deal with this issue and is allowing a minority of voices to dictate the position we are taking on full acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in our church. Whilst there is much to celebrate about our church's position (affirming queer clergy and allowing ministers to marry same gendered couples are two examples) there is still a lot of work to be done on educating people about the active discrimination and injustice that still permeates part of our church, and the harm that this causes to all of our LGBTQI+ friends. I am all too aware of this harm, having pastored a Rainbow gathering on my last congregation.*

*I am hopeful that the Assembly will give the concept of a living apology deep consideration, and come to recognise that this will indeed help to heal wounds and truly grow us into a fully accepting and inclusive church. I also hope that the proposed circle will be embraced and resourced.*

\*

## **Main activities**

Since October 2020 the Task Group has engaged in the following activities. Many have taken place at regular monthly meetings though several additional meetings have also been held.

- Meeting with theologians to consider biblical and theological matters, and the Basis of Union.
- Develop pastoral principles to guide the work of the group and the wider church when considering LGBTIQA+ matters.
- Research on what actions have been taken regarding an apology to LGBTIQA+ people by other churches.
- Consideration of different ways to understand an apology.
- Meeting with UAICC interim Chairperson; Assembly consultant on national conferences; Uniting Vic/Tas on their LGBTIQA+ policies and procedures.
- ACT based members participated in a worship service with the Rainbow Christian Alliance at Tuggeranong Congregation.
- Open consultation with Uniting Church LGBTIQA+ people.
- Meetings with the President and General Secretary; meeting with the Synod Moderators; attending and reporting at ASC meetings.

Detailed papers on some of the above areas are filed with the Assembly office, and available if there is future work undertaken in this area by the Assembly.

\*

## **Apelu**

*My family and I joined the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) when we arrived in Australia, from Samoa, in the mid-1990s due largely to its commitment to be a Church for kinds of Christians. While I knew that was the ideal, I still did not expect the leadership of UCA to be*

*so lukewarm to supporting the cause of the to LGBTQI+ community. I have been speaking and writing in support of our LGBTQI+ community; it is the reason why I accepted the nomination to join the Task Force for an apology. While I am deeply disappointed with what we now know about the attitude of our leaders, I am greatly encouraged by the hard work and determination of the members of the group. I would like to encourage all of us to continue working despite the vibes we are hearing. As we go through Holy Week, Good Friday and then Easter, we are being reminded that this is exactly why this work needs to be done. Life with God, according to the Christian tradition, is not for a select few, but for all who have faith in Jesus Christ.*

\*

### **Warren**

*As a veteran of the Assembly Sexuality Task Group in the 1990s, the Apology Task Group has been low key and affirming. This has enabled the Task Group to work together building understanding, trust and new thinking, without the constant external attacks we faced on the Sexuality Task Group.*

*With important reservations, the Uniting Church has made progress in the direction of LGBTIQA+ inclusion in the past 30 years. But our overall position in 2024 remains one of diversity, not inclusion.*

*I started thinking about the possibility of an apology from the Uniting Church in 2017. A new national Christian organisation, Equal Voices, launched a movement for a national apology to LGBTIQA+ people at St James Anglican Church in Sydney. Why not the Uniting Church?*

*The Task Group has enabled me to think through, in much more detail than before, the meaning of apology, repentance, forgiveness and renewal. I shouldn't have needed it, but various discussions also reminded me of the pain, suffering and trauma inflicted on queer people by churches and others, often in the name of God. Some of that memory was my own pain.*

*In the end the Task Group reached a common conviction that a Living Apology was the best way to move forward towards reconciliation. My mind had changed somewhat since 2017. I have always shared hopes and struggles for a church and society which both welcomes and celebrates LGBTIQA+ plus people as beloved and blessed in God's good creation.*

\*

### **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 LGBTIQA+ people. We have collaborated with forces that sought to oppress, or to change, LGBTIQA+ 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, LGBTIQA+ people. At the same time, the Task Group's Terms of Reference call for "honestly naming the past". We accept that many LGBTIQA+ 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.

From early considerations the Task Group was aware of two questions which need to be answered: (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. Also early in the life of the Task Group four guiding principles were agreed. They are:

- (1) *Ensure no avoidable harm to individuals results from processes recommended to the Assembly.*
- (2) *Respect agency and autonomy of all involved in the apology process.*
- (3) *Work towards health, embracing pain as part of the healing process.*
- (4) *Hear and validate people's stories as a key element in developing an Apology.*

As the work progressed to 2023, the Task Group formed a strong evidence-based view that an official apology to LGBTIQA+ people from the Uniting Church must be trauma informed and accompanied by skilled and accessible pastoral supports and practical responses to the persons to whom the apology will be addressed. These are currently not in place throughout the Uniting Church.

During 2023 the Task Group gradually clarified that there could be two possible approaches to offering "an apology". These are described as:

- (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. We reached the conclusion that the 2024 Assembly is unlikely to achieve consensus on reversing what the Task Group regards as discriminatory Uniting Church policies on ordination and marriage.

We were also increasingly conscious of the risks of offering a formal apology. Task Group member Graeme Randall summarises the risk 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.<sup>vi</sup>*

In contrast, 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 (or any other council of the church, or other organisation) would commit to.

The Task Group examined apologies offered by other churches in Australia and overseas. Invariably they read somewhat hollow, as many of the churches offering a formal apology have continued discriminatory practices, thereby perpetuating what is being apologised for. We noted 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.

In addition to pastoral considerations, this has led the Task Group 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. This became the major consideration in the Task Group's conclusion to support a Living Apology.

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### **Graeme**

*I'm a former ordained minister in a non-affirming church. The teaching of the church meant that I spent more than half my life hating myself and cursing God for being gay. I was eventually kicked out of the church and ministry because I was gay. After a period of deconstructing and reconstructing my faith, I discovered acceptance in parts of the Uniting Church (UCA). However, I became aware that the UCA was not fully affirming. It was during the marriage equality debate that I realised the harm that not being fully affirming causes. By allowing all voices and all opinions, the UCA legitimises and endorses the hatred and harm caused to non-cis-gendered, non-heterosexual people, and de-legitimises the voice of acceptance within the church. Regardless of whether that was the intent of the UCA. By allowing that voice at the table, the church approves and endorses the opinion. The tacit approval of such harm and hatred means that an absolute apology cannot be given until the voice that causes harm is removed from and denied a place at the table. At least not without doing further harm. My time on the TG has taught me that there is a long way to go in the UCA before it is ready to offer an apology. But it has also taught me that there is movement. The UCA structure means that the battle cannot be won through large gestures, such as an apology, but by inching forward. However, that means we must live with the immeasurable number of people who will be lost and harmed and die – some probably killed – whilst we are inching forward. Unless we want to take decisive action.*

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### **LGBTIQA+ consultation**

In undertaking this work the Task Group was aware that the Uniting Church has held substantial discussions concerning human sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, since the matter was first referred to the Assembly by the (then) Presbytery of Yarra Valley in 1981.<sup>vii</sup> Copies of major reports and decisions are available from the Assembly *Illuminate* site.<sup>viii</sup> In the latest decisions made, the Fifteenth Assembly meeting resolved to change the Uniting Church's national policy on marriage which permitted ordained ministers and Church Councils to celebrate marriages for two persons.<sup>ix</sup>

The Terms of Reference anticipate that the work we have done, while arising within the life of the Church, has the potential for particularly broad impact: “within the Uniting Church, with the Australian LGBTIQ(A+) communities, and the wider society.” We have not been able to engage with LGBTIQA+ organisations in the wider society, some of which have been actively engaged in an apology process with other institutions such as parliaments, police forces and the media.

Towards the end of our work we facilitated an open consultation with members of the Uniting Church LGBTIQA+ communities. A report on the consultation has been provided to the ASC. In addition to a range of specific comments and experiences concerning the Uniting Church, there was no support by those attending for a formal apology and some reasonable support for a living apology. One comment which resonated in terms of how the Uniting Church might approach its future engagement with LGBTIQA+ was:

*I am not happy to be described in terms of shame and hurt. We are not a problem! There is a need for affirming the gifts of queer people in terms of education, formation, resourcing and empowering.*

\*

### **Lin**

*I love the UCA. I love our vision, and I love how we live it out in so many diverse ways across this vast continent. We are a contemporary church, formed for love and justice. The one thing that we have yet to get right is being all in on love and justice. If we are serious about every person being formed in the image of God, then we must be serious about loving and celebrating each person, as they are, in their wholeness. We can't be half affirming. Older members will tell you that we can, because we are. Its true that that's where we are now, but it's also true that there's a steady exodus of people leaving our church as they bump up against the non-affirming bits of it. You can't be half pregnant, and you can't be half affirming. Either we stand as a movement with and for all, or we do not.*

*I'm a cis woman, I've been a leader in the life of our church most of my life, and I've been absolutely humbled by the resilience and strength of the queer folk on the task group, and of so many queer people we listened to along the way. Hanging in there in a church that makes space for people who fundamentally reject you takes a special kind of resilience.*

*I'm the parent of a queer kid, who came out about half way through my time on the task group. Both my kids are part of the diaspora of those who've stopped participating in the life of our church, citing our lack of integrity in seeking to hold everyone together and the harm it causes people. That stance has got to be consigned to history. We can't be affirming and hold spaces for those who are non-affirming. The only thing that tolerance can't accept is intolerance.*

*There are lots of churches in Australia that are non-affirming, and not a single one that is 100% affirming.*

*My time on the task group has strengthened my view that we must grow beyond trying to hold oppositional views together and make some clear calls on our position on gender and sexuality. On critical contemporary issues like human rights, modern day slavery, and gender and sexuality we are called to take a stand for love and justice by holding a single clear position. A living apology is the pathway for that journey. I hope and pray that that'd the path we walk down, together with Christ.*

*How long, oh Lord, how long?*

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### **Biblical and theological issues<sup>x</sup>**

The Task Group was conscious in doing its work that there continues to be diverse views in the Uniting Church in matters of human sexuality and gender identity. Our thinking was grounded in the theological considerations of a comprehensive statement from the Assembly in 2006 titled “Dignity in Humanity”. The statement declares that:

*...the Uniting Church believes that every person is precious and entitled to live with dignity because they are God’s children, and that each person’s life and rights need to be protected or the human community (and its reflection of God) and all people are diminished.* <sup>xi</sup>

In considering options for an apology 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>xii</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.

The Task Group worked from the principle that it is important that to 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 Uniting 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.

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).

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## **Conclusion**

Task Group members thank the church for the opportunity to serve in this way. It has been a time of learning, understanding differences, expressing disappointments, and sharing hopes for the future of LGBTIQ+ people in the Church. Our work has been but one of many steps the Uniting Church has taken over more than forty years to reconsider matters of gender identity and sexuality. The Task Group sees a role for a living apology in the next steps, along with a developing sense of pride, continuing and strengthening the Church’s welcome of our LGBTIQ+ siblings.

## **Appendix One: Terms of Reference**

**APOLOGY TO LGBTIQ AUSTRALIANS TASK GROUP**  
**TERMS OF REFERENCE**  
(approved, Assembly Standing Committee, July 2019)

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- Purpose:** 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.
- Reporting Arrangements:** Assembly Standing Committee (ASC)
- Period:** This Terms of Reference is for the period of achieving the purpose of the task group
- Membership:** As determined by the ASC on the recommendation of the Assembly / Assembly General Secretary / Assembly Resourcing Unit (ARU)

**Task Required:**

1. Consult widely with LGBTIQ and other members of the Church in order 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. When considering this, the task group will 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.
2. If timing is appropriate, bring a proposal regarding an apology to the 16th Assembly. The best apology might be a "living apology" though this does not preclude a formal statement by the Assembly.
3. The apology might draw on, but not go beyond, existing statements, decisions and theological work that has been approved by either the Assembly or ASC in the past.

**Expected Outcomes:**

At the conclusion of its work the Task Group will:

1. Present a Draft Report to the Assembly General Secretary outlining the directions the group is taking to the ASC by March 2020.
2. Present a Final Report including an executive summary and any proposals / recommendations for consideration at the 16th Assembly to the ASC by November 2020

Note: Should additional time be required to complete this process and it is evident that this will not be ready for consideration at the 16th Assembly, then future expected outcomes and a revised timeframe should be determined at the November 2020 ASC meeting.

**How the task group will work:**

1. Be grounded in the gospel and build upon the tradition of the Uniting Church in Australia.
2. Live out our covenant as First and Second Peoples.
3. Live out our commitment to being a multicultural church, oriented towards justice.
4. Embody an inclusive church where those of differing ability, age, gender, race and sexuality are welcomed.
5. Ensure that the activities of the Task Group are consistent with the Basis of Union of the UCA, the Constitution and Regulations, and align with the current strategic priorities of the Assembly.
6. Consider how the work of the Task Group relates to other councils, agencies and groups within the UCA, and work collaboratively wherever possible.
7. Consider how the work of the Task Group relates to other bodies ecumenically and with other civil society organisation and work collaboratively wherever possible.
8. Where appropriate, conduct its work on the basis of rigorous, contemporary research and analysis.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Revd Peter Weeks and Revd Ric Morrell, Proposal to the Fifteen Assembly, Assembly Papers, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Assembly Standing Committee, July 2019.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Graeme Randall, in the Task Group report to the November 2023 meeting of the ASC.

<sup>vii</sup> Gordon Dicker, *Homosexuality and the Church*, Report of the Assembly Committee on Homosexuality and the Church, Uniting Church Press, Sydney, 1985.

<sup>viii</sup> For a wider range of resources see <https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/>

<sup>ix</sup> Decisions of the Fifteenth Assembly, Uniting Church in Australia.

<sup>x</sup> This section is drawn from work shared with the Task Group by the Revd Elizabeth Raine and the Revd Dr John Squires.

<sup>xi</sup> "Dignity in Humanity: Recognising Christ in Every Person", in Elenie Poulos and Cynthia Coghill, *For a World Reconciled: Justice Statements from the Uniting Church in Australia, 1977-2015*, Sydney, 2016, page 127.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, Pages 6,7.