



APOLOGY TO LGBTIQ+ AUSTRALIANS

1. INTRODUCTION

I am very pleased to provide the final report of the Apology to LGBTIQ+ Australians Task Group to the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC). (The acronym 'LGBTIQ+' 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 LGBTIQ+ communities.

Task Group members have backgrounds in local church ministry, clinical psychology, health and community services, LGBTIQ+ ministry and advocacy, social policy and social justice. Five of the eight members of the Task Group identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ 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.

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 LGBTIQ+ 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





2. 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”.ⁱ 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.”ⁱⁱ (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.

Note that throughout the report, quotes from members of the Task Group are used to fill out the context and thinking in which the Task Group did its work.

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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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3. 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 LGBTIQ+ policies and procedures.
- ACT based members participated in a worship service with the Rainbow Christian Alliance at Tuggeranong Congregation.
- Open consultation with Uniting Church LGBTIQ+ 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 LGBTIQ+ friends.*

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4. 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 LGBTIQ+ people. We have collaborated with forces that sought to oppress, or to change, LGBTIQ+ 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 LGBTIQ+ 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.

A living apology would acknowledge the harm, exclusion and stigma faced by LGBTIQ+ 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 LGBTIQ+ people would be crucial to a living apology process. A full apology is something which would be offered by the Assembly. A living apology is something to which the Assembly (or any other council of the church, or other organisation) would commit.

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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 LGBTIQ+ lives in faithfulness to the Good News of Christ Jesus.*

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5. LGBTIQ+ CONSULTATION

Towards the end of our work we facilitated an open consultation with members of the Uniting Church LGBTIQ+ 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 LGBTIQ+ 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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6. 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

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*.^{iv}
- (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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7. 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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8. 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 Jenski, Revd Gordon Ramsay, Revd Sani Vaeluaga.

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Endnotes

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

ⁱⁱ Assembly Standing Committee, July 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ "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.

1. ^{iv} Ibid. Pages 6,7.

