



**The United Church
of Canada
General Council**

GCE44 Living Apology Into Action: Iridesce Working Group Report and Recommendations

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Origin: The Iridesce Working Group to the General Secretary of The United Church of Canada

Preamble

We, the Iridesce Working Group, offer the following recommendations to the General Secretary for action in response to the Final Report of Iridesce: The Living Apology Project. These recommendations are the product of a year-long process of deliberation and reflect a breadth of individual and community experiences across The United Church of Canada. They express our conviction that God continues to call us to reconciliation around issues of sexuality and gender, and our longing for a Church that fully embraces 2S-LGBTQIA+ people.

How do we feel/know that God is calling us to reconciliation? Reconciliation with who? With God? With the Church?

Our working group has a shared understanding that 2S-LGBTQIA+ experiences are always emerging. Our process has tried to account for this quality of 2S-LGBTQIA+ emergence by assuming the incompleteness of our work: we expect, in due time, that understandings of sexuality and gender will change and broaden the scope of Iridesce and its implications for the church. The United Church of Canada is encouraged to receive these recommendations in a spirit of openness to the emergence of new 2S-LGBTQIA+ realities.

We affirm and celebrate the work of the United Church over the last forty years—from the 1988 decision (of the United Church's General Council to affirm that gender and sexuality are gifts of God, that all persons are made in the image of God, and to welcome into full membership and ministry people of all sexual orientations and gender identities), to

ordination, to affirming same-gender marriages, recognizing that inclusion goes beyond orientation to include gender identity, and the work of Affirm United/S'Affirmer Ensemble (AU/SE). Our working group has challenged itself, and invites the wider Church to expand its vision of justice around issues of sexuality and gender. We have struggled to balance our hopes for what the Church could be with the realities of where the Church currently is in its path of reconciliation with 2S-LGBTQIA+ people. These recommendations are not the end point of the transformation to which God is calling our United Church, but are merely one part of the ongoing journey.

Throughout its process, our working group has been grounded in faith in the God who creates us each in our singular goodness and in our individual diversities, and who calls us collectively to reconciliation in a wounded and wounding world. We abide in the hope that such reconciliation is possible in the Church: that this chosen family of faith can heal from past harms and allow us to express our sexualities and genders in their God-given fullness. Above all, we are driven by love, for our Church and for our world.

May these recommendations be received in the spirit in which they are offered.

Background

In 2009, the 40th General Council, in response to a perceived lack of movement on the 1999 consultation with LGBTQ+ ministry personnel and the continued emergence of challenges related to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit members, mandated a National Consultation on Homophobia and Heterosexism in the United Church. The final report from this consultation was presented to the General Council Executive (GCE) in January 2012, from which [Iridesce: The Living Apology Project](#) was launched in 2017. This project was a collaboration between the General Council Office (GCO) and Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble (AU/SE). Its goal was to invite the United Church "into a journey of dialogue and reconciliation with LGBTQ2S+ persons" through story-sharing, conversation, worship, and education.

Over the course of three years, the project gathered stories from across the United Church, and submitted its final report to the General Secretary in July 2020. In January 2021, the General Council Executive (GCE) reviewed this final report, and directed staff in the General Council Office (GCO) to form a working group to recommend follow-up actions to the General Council Executive.

In midsummer 2021, it was proposed that GCO and AU/SE would once again partner to oversee the Iridesce Working Group, concluding with formal recommendations for follow-up on the Iridesce Project to the GCE. The proposal was approved at the September 2021 AU/SE Council meeting.

When inviting individuals to the Iridesce Working Group, efforts were made to ensure it reflected the diversity of the United Church's membership. This includes different experiences of sexuality, gender, and race, as well as generational and regional differences. In January 2022, nine committed individuals became the working group, carrying out its mandate of submitting recommendations to the GCE by the fall of 2022.

We recognise that rigid structures and processes tend to disadvantage those who are already marginalised. The working group made space for both the complexity of its subject matter and the humanity of its members. As a result, the group decided not to bind itself to external timelines or expectations, but carried out its work out in a way that honoured its members' voices and gave them the time they needed to work through difficult conversations. As a result of this approach, and the mandated scope, the working group worked through to the end of 2022, with this report submitted to General Secretary in January 2023.

This is our work.

It is time for an apology from The United Church of Canada as a whole to the 2S-LGBTQIA+ community, but without action, words are hollow. The following recommendations are the working group's invitation for the United Church to Live an Apology into Action.

Section 1 is advice on apology and prioritized recommendations. Section 2 is further recommendations informed by the 2020 Iridesce Report that bear consideration. The *italicized* points indicate a priority action within the recommendation.

Section 1

Recommendation 1

The General Council to provide support to AU/SE and its Affirming Ministry Program in order to more fully live into the 1988 decision.

The Affirming Ministries Program of AU/SE provides the process, resources, and assistance to all ministries that seek “to be fully inclusive of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.” This critical work is currently carried out on a volunteer basis by 2S-LGBTQIA+ people and their allies in AU/SE.

Support could include:

- set an example for courts and ministries of the United Church by exploring the possibility of the General Council Office becoming an Affirming Ministry;
- support General Council to work with AU/SE Affirming Ministry Coordinators to encourage all regional councils to become Affirming Ministries;
- provide funds to AU/SE to staff the Affirming Ministry Coordinator position, and offering staff support for this work from the GCO;
- support Regional Councils to work with the AU/SE Affirming Ministry Coordinators to encourage all United Church ministries to become Affirming;
- *implement a system to track and clearly indicate (especially to potential members or attendees) the Affirming status of every ministry in the Church annually/biannually (Affirming, in the Affirming process, or Not Affirming). Every Community of Faith is expected to make a conscious decision annually/biannually to become Affirming, stay Affirming or explicitly not be Affirming; and*
- conduct research on why ministries—including those that members describe as “affirming”—stop short of going through the Affirming Ministries Program.

Recommendation 2

The General Council to name and intentionally affirm bisexual and other less-recognised members of 2S-LGBTQIA+ communities.

Many experiences of gender and sexuality have been marginalised within the broader 2S-LGBTQIA+ umbrella. For example, in the leadup to and aftermath of 1988, bisexual people were often sidelined or rejected by those who felt that bisexuals’ attraction to their own and other genders undermined struggles for gay and lesbian justice.

Learning from this painful past, and recognising that 2S-LGBTQIA+ experience is always emerging, the United Church must continue to broaden its understanding and welcome of marginalised members of 2S-LGBTQIA+ communities, including (but not limited to) those who are Two-Spirit, transgender, intersex, asexual, demisexual, aromantic, and pan-romantic.

This growth was exemplified by the Transgender Working Group in 2012. The intersectionality of race, ability, gender identity, sexual identity, and more leads to further marginalization.

Support could include:

- *openly affirm, bisexual and diverse people (see glossary) who have not yet been intentionally affirmed within the United Church. Build into General Council meetings a regular process of affirming gender and sexual identities as they evolve, including bisexual, trans, non-binary, etc.;*
- observe “theme years” or other sustained periods of collective movement across the United Church that focus liturgy, education, and action on specific marginalised experiences of gender or sexuality; and
- learn with and from partners, especially AU/SE, about experiences of sexuality and gender that are marginalised within and beyond the United Church.

Recommendation 3

The General Council to celebrate with gratitude those who have done the hard, faithful work to carry us to today, through public witness and story-telling culminating at the 45th General Council in 2025. And, the General Council to provide opportunity and resources that honour and share the historic and emerging stories of diverse experiences within the 2S-LGBTQIA+ community.

While the work of justice for 2S-LGBTQIA+ people in the United Church is ongoing, it is imperative that the General Council recognize all those in The United Church of Canada who offered support, who were open to the Spirit in 1988, and who continue to be engaged in the United Church even when challenged by the vote in 1988 and its aftermath.

Recognizing that change toward an affirming position is often spurred by engagement with 2S-LGBTQIA+ people and their stories, therefore we recommend that GCE encourage engagement from all expressions of The United Church of Canada with the stories currently posted on the Iridesce website, as well as collecting and sharing new stories with a broader scope beyond the original Iridesce mandate.

Support could include:

- *create a public list of individual contributors, with a promise to add to the list biannually as long as names continue to be submitted. This promise could be held and enacted by GCO with AU/SE. Acknowledging that it is impossible to name all contributors, also use categories as noted below, that include people's actions and affirms all identities and expressions of 2S-LGBTQIA+ experience; **
- *curate, collate and tag the collected stories of The Iridesce Project. Tags should include individual apologies offered through Iridesce; calls for an apology; clergy experiences; etc. This story collection is a living document that can be a source of creative inspiration for future awareness and education efforts;*
- *support, in perpetuity, accessible platforms (currently online) to host the Iridesce project and its gathered stories;*
- *commission a stole that incorporates names/communities/events that are part of this history and that could be worn at different events moving forward;*
- *create a liturgical prayer and/or actions that lift up names and/or categories of people;*
- *create a Speaker's Bureau of storytellers embedded in their communities in all regions across Canada. The speakers will know how to do this work and be able to tell their own stories and the stories of others with integrity;*
- *engage with the stories collected by the denomination through Iridesce and curated in a story database on commemorative days. These dates include the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (May 17), [United Church Pride Sunday \(1st Sunday of June\)](#), the [Trans Day of Remembrance](#) (Nov 20), and Pride Weeks (which differ geographically); and*
- *collaborate with and support AU/SE to carry out programmatic work in relation to the ongoing collection and sharing of stories, including productions of the Iridesce play, trauma-informed digital content creation, etc.*

*The following groups of people should be included in such a recognition:

- those in the United Church and beyond who paved the way in the decades leading toward the 1988 vote;
- people who were open to the Spirit at the GC in 1988;
- the youth who made such an impact on the 1988 vote;
- people who stayed in the United Church, despite differences;
- people who found commonalities, despite differences;
- people who have advocated for justice for gay and lesbian and, later, trans and bisexual people—families, friends, allies, and communities;

- cis/heterosexual allies of 2S-LGBTQIA+ people;
- all ministers, but particularly 2S-LGBTQIA+ ministers, who so faithfully served their congregations with deep pastoral care, making space for people to grapple with the issues, to dialogue, and to dissent;
- 2S-LGBTQIA+ members, who stayed with the United Church before, during, and after the process leading up to 1988, often at great cost to their own emotional and spiritual well-being; and
- people who continue to take clear, just actions to make the United Church a more welcoming and inclusive space for people of emerging gender expressions and romantic and sexual identities.

Key individuals should be recognized within each group, and gratitude should be expressed to the group as a whole—all those not individually named who have come before us, who are now with us, and who are yet to come. (See pages 35-37 for a preliminary list of names in Appendix IV: Iridesce Archival Research Report.)

Recommendation 4

The General Council to implement additional supports for 2S-LGBTQIA+ clergy.

Ministry personnel face unique challenges with respect to issues of gender and sexuality in the Church. Those who serve the Church in its mission to live out God's loving justice in the world must be adequately supported in their ministries and lives of faith.

Support could include:

- *institute formal supports, through policy, programs, and funding, for ministry personnel who experience stress and trauma in relation to marginalised experiences of gender and sexuality;*
- create and support spaces of community for 2S-LGBTQIA+ ministry personnel with an intentional focus on intergenerational spaces, in order to glean learnings from current and past/former ministry personnel who identify as 2S-LGBTQIA+;
- offer financial support for 2S-LGBTQIA+ ministry personnel to access safe community, learning opportunities, and other necessary supports outside of the Church.

Recommendation 5

The General Council to offer an apology through intentional action.

While it is up to the denomination to craft and offer an apology, the working group recommends a process of reflection to ensure what is offered is not merely saying “I’m sorry”. We encourage the church to recognize that its earlier understanding, attitude and actions were “wrong.” Let the affected communities know where relationship has been broken, naming the harms explicitly, and where room can be made for healing. Relationships are expansive and messy. Only actions accompanying the words will bring this apology to life with meaning in the midst of the many, many relationships that are our church.

Advice on how to create and offer an apology can be found on pages 11 – 12 of [Iridesce: The Living Apology Project Final Report](#). In addition to this advice the working group saw some wisdom in the wording of the Canadian federal [government apology](#) (in November 2017). Members of the Working Group will make themselves available for conversation and consultation.

Section 2

Recommendation 6

The General Council to lead ongoing conversations on sexuality.

Some people in the United Church are uncomfortable talking about sex and sexuality, which can be a major hindrance to the pursuit of justice for 2S-LGBTQIA+ people.

Support could include:

- promote open conversations around diverse experiences of sexuality that are as safe as possible—i.e. trauma-informed, non-judgmental, confidential, non-exploitative, etc.—for those engaged in them, and particularly for 2S-LGBTQIA+ people;
 - Engage with youth and young adults, many of whom are in the process of exploring and developing new understandings of sexuality, to initiate or lead these conversations.
 - Promote conversations on how to be safe and supportive family/community—being a supportive grandparent/parent/aunt/uncle/sibling/guardian/etc.

- Ensure that such conversations explore connections between sexism, transmisogyny, and sexuality, as well as the prejudicial association of 2S-LGBTQIA+ communities with sexual violence and abuse. Such conversations could also consider intersections between 2S-LGBTQIA+ peoples and additional identities.
- integrate inclusive and holistic sex education (of which 2S-LGBTQIA+ experience is only one element) into its broader approaches to Christian education, promoting and supporting the use of existing educational resources in communities of faith and strategically creating new or supplementary resources. These resources must be age appropriate.

Recommendation 7

The General Council to reach out to 2S-LGBTQIA+ communities beyond the church.

In a spirit of allyship, partnership, and proclaiming the good news of God's love and liberation for all—and not, by contrast, with the aim of proselytizing or expanding membership—the General Council should support Affirming Ministries to reach out to wider 2S-LGBTQIA+ communities.

Support could include:

- create communal spaces for 2S-LGBTQIA+ people to be queer and Christian, both within the United Church and ecumenically;
- offer special worship services (that in that moment can be a safer space), in partnership with AU/SE, for those who do not feel safe in a Christian ministry context, regardless of its Affirming status (e.g., those who have been harmed by the church as a colonial institution); and
- recognize and respond to the different needs of communities for partnership and support. Authentic partnership and support require an awareness of the cultures, histories, and needs of each community, and the way these interlock and intersect with other dynamics of injustice.

Recommendation 8

The General Council to articulate how and why being Affirming is an option in The United Church of Canada and support communities of faith in identifying their policies

on sexuality and gender.

The United Church of Canada is often publicly understood as the inclusive, “gay positive church” or affirming church. This, in fact, varies from place to place. 2S-LGBTQIA+ people, their families, friends, and allies within the United Church struggle with local communities of faith being able to “choose to discriminate.” By not declaring itself to be Affirming, and putting the responsibility on local communities of faith, the United Church perpetuates discrimination and harm on members of the 2S-LGBTQIA+ community. Clear community of faith policies will prevent harmful misperceptions of safety and give a better overall sense of where particular communities of faith stand.

Support could include:

- facilitate open conversations around 2S-LGBTQIA+ affirmation in communities of faith;
- clearly explain whenever and wherever it is appropriate that individual communities of faith make the decision to celebrate and affirm 2S-LGBTQIA+ relationships (i.e. perform marriages). The denomination cannot enforce this;
- support every community of faith to make a conscious decision to become affirming, stay affirming, or not be affirming. Include the question in the annual reporting process;
- track every community of faith’s status and make that information easily available;
- promote the official Affirming process and commitment. It is important that information and resources be available in various languages as needed by communities of faith. As part of strengthening the process for the United Church, celebrate some specific moments in time. (Examples include: anniversary of the Affirming program; milestones being met of certain numbers of communities of faith or regional councils who have become Affirming.);
- ensure that the courts of the United Church (communities of faith, regional councils, and the General Council) as well as its associated ministries explicitly articulate their stance on the affirmation of 2S-LGBTQIA+ people, and whether or not they conduct same-sex/gender marriages. This clear statement then needs to be regularly and publicly communicated for existing and prospective congregants to easily access; and
- initiate and fund research on why communities of faith and ministries resist becoming affirming, identifying obstacles, and points of resistance.

Recommendation 9

The General Council to offer education on how to deal with conflict.

One of the core findings of the Iridesce project was that the controversy of the 1988 vote and its aftermath were as much about dynamics of and approaches to conflict as they were about the actual issues at stake. The General Council must address its implicit culture of conflict avoidance and find more constructive approaches to conflict.

Support could include:

- build clergy and lay capacities for navigating conflict in faith-based settings by: adopting or developing resources informed by anti-oppression, harm reduction, and transformative justice frameworks; employing skilled and faith-based mediators and mediation trainers; prioritizing conflict mediation skills in staff hiring; and enabling communities and ministries across the United Church to share expertise around navigating conflict; and
- develop more robust institutional structures of support, safety, and accountability around conflict. Regional supports for ministers engaged in the resolution of disagreements need to include culturally, historically, and trauma-informed approaches to resolution.

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