

THEOLOGICAL FORUM MAY 2021

Proposed Deliverance

The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report
2. Commend Section 3 "Being Confirmed, Professing the Faith, Sharing Communion" as an exploration of Profession of Faith/Confirmation and church membership. (*Section 3*)
3. Receive the report "Westminster, Confessions and the Church" (*Appendix*) as an interim response to the instruction given by the General Assembly of 2018.
4. Encourage Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions to discuss the questions laid out in Section 23 of "Westminster, Confessions and the Church" (*Appendix*) and respond to the Theological Forum by 31 December 2021.
5. Instruct the Theological Forum to bring firm proposals regarding the confessional standards of the Church to the General Assembly of 2022.

Report

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Theological Forum was established by the General Assembly to 'resource, express and challenge the theology that informs the life and work of the Church'. Its remit is:

- (a) To articulate and develop the doctrinal understanding of the Church in accordance with Holy Scripture and with reference to the confessional standards of the Church of Scotland;
- (b) To express the theological vision of the Church in its worship, fellowship, witness and mission in and beyond contemporary Scotland;
- (c) To respond to particular theological requests as and when these arise from the General Assembly, the Council of Assembly and the ecumenical partners of the Church;
- (d) To draw to the attention of the General Assembly theological matters which the Theological Forum considers to be of pressing contemporary relevance;
- (e) To stimulate wider theological reflection throughout the Church on key doctrinal, ethical and apologetic matters through the provision of appropriate materials and other activities.

1.2 The Forum has continued to serve this wide-ranging remit throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and over the last two years has concentrated on those issues assigned to it by the 2018, 2019 and 2020 General Assemblies. Its work has been carried out through substantial reading, discussion, attendance at conferences, reflection and prayer in its meetings, and through consultation with the other Councils, Committees and Fora of the Church. The Forum has also advised upon a spectrum of issues that have arisen out of enquiries received from the wider Church.

1.3 The Forum was due to report on Profession of Faith and the Westminster Confession of Faith at the 2020 General Assembly. As this was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Forum now offers the following Report and Appendix, providing an update both on work undertaken throughout 2019-2020, and throughout 2020-2021.

2019-2020

2. WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH

The General Assembly of 2018 instructed the Forum to review the status of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and to report to the General Assembly of 2020. As part of its work on this issue, the Forum commissioned four papers and organised a conference titled *Westminster, Confessions and the Church*, which was held at New College on Wednesday 8 May 2019^[1]. The Forum's report, contained in the Appendix, is offered as an interim contribution; we hope to bring firmer proposals to the Assembly of 2022.

3. PROFESSION OF FAITH

Being Confirmed, Professing the Faith, Sharing Communion

This section, in response to instructions from the General Assembly, explores the meaning and nature of Profession of Faith/Confirmation within the Church, and relationships with Baptism, Communion and membership. It sees Profession of Faith and Confirmation as aspects of expressing commitment to Christ and the church, publicly in worship, which should be seen principally as theologically rich and pastorally helpful to individuals and to congregations.

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 At the 2018 and 2019 General Assemblies, the Theological Forum was instructed “to consider the place of Profession of Faith (Admission to the Lord’s Supper or Confirmation) and sharing Communion in today’s Church,” and to “explore the concept of church membership in relation to age.”

3.1.2 The Forum welcomed these instructions, particularly in relation to the Forum’s previous work on children and Communion. A working group was set up to consider the theological, pastoral, ecclesiological and legal considerations surrounding Profession of Faith/Confirmation and Communion, as well as how these considerations might influence discussions on church membership.

3.1.3 As part of this ongoing work, the working group also collaborated with the Mission and Discipleship Council, following the instructions received at the 2018 General Assembly:

10. *Instruct the Council, in collaboration with the Theological Forum, to develop creative, instructive and grace-filled pathways for the spiritual development of children and young people in order to support congregations in welcoming them to the Lord’s Table.*
11. *Commend the work done on the ‘Children, Young People and Communion Survey Findings 2018’ and instruct the Council in consultation with the Theological Forum to produce a resource on the theology and practice of Communion in the 21st Century Church of Scotland.*

3.1.4 The resource “Together at the Table”^[2] was produced as part of an initiative to provide resources for local congregations as they consider the theological issues, pastoral importance and practical considerations surrounding Profession of Faith/Confirmation and Communion.

3.1.5 The aforementioned activities have been particularly pressing insofar as there are growing concerns about low and declining numbers of children and young people in local congregations.^[3] Not only are there increasing numbers of local congregations with no children or young people in regular attendance, but the mode and depth of engagement characterised by those who do attend is concerning. Recent years have seen a significant decrease in children being baptised, and a great many congregations do not report children or young people receiving Communion. Often this is due to the fact that there simply are no children or young people in attendance, but it is also the case that many congregations still do not admit children or young people to Communion in the first place (even though Church legislation has permitted this since 1992).^[4] The Forum would like to draw attention to the strong theological rationale for admitting children to the Table, laid out in its 2018 Report^[5] and accepted by the General Assembly, and we encourage local congregations to take seriously the developmental, theological, and communal importance of welcoming children and young people to Communion.

3.1.6 With this concerning context in mind, the central conviction arising from the Forum’s work on issues surrounding Profession of Faith/Confirmation in particular is the affirmation that while Profession of Faith/Confirmation has been decoupled from its previous function as Admission to the Lord’s Supper, the theological, pastoral and communal importance of these rites remains as significant as ever. Further, it seems clear that the personal and corporate significance of Profession of Faith/Confirmation requires that pastoral sensitivity and flexibility be encouraged within local congregations. These rites may rightly be seen not as rigid templates to be followed in precisely the same manner in all times and all places. Rather they can be recognised as relational, communal, educational and spiritual processes allowing for individuality, creativity, and pastoral sensitivity to the specific needs and contexts of

the individuals undergoing Profession of Faith/Confirmation within the broad range of different congregational settings.

3.2 Theological Dimensions of Confirmation/ Profession of Faith and Communion

3.2.1 The history of Confirmation/Profession of Faith within the Church of Scotland is complicated. There may indeed be some confusion about Confirmation and Profession of Faith: Are these equivalent? If so, why do we have two different terms to refer to the same rite? (Or more – people popularly speak in this context of “joining the church.”) If they are not equivalent, what is the difference between Confirmation and Profession of Faith? Then there are questions around the relationship between Confirmation and Profession of Faith on the one hand, and Admission to the Lord’s Supper on the other. Moreover, those familiar with the history of Confirmation may be concerned about the rite’s origin as a sacrament: why should the Church of Scotland practise Confirmation, when our theology does not recognise the sacramental status or function with which it was originally associated? Responding to these questions requires some awareness of the Church’s evolving use of and legislation surrounding Confirmation/Profession of Faith, and an appreciation of the Church’s *dynamic* theological relationship with such rites – in all their historical particularities.

3.2.2 For much of the Church of Scotland’s history, Profession of Faith was considered a requirement for partaking in the Lord’s Supper. Children were usually baptised as infants, and later, usually as teenagers, made a public Profession of Faith. While there was of course variation in the way people were prepared, including the form of any classes or services, the rite itself was seen as officially admitting the young person to Communion. In the service, young people would be invited to make a Profession of Faith, articulating their commitment to a life of faith and to the local congregation. The General Assembly of 1706 enacted that “At the first admission of any to the Lord’s Supper, ministers should put the persons to be admitted in mind of their parents’ engagement for them in Baptism, and bid them explicitly and personally to renew their baptismal covenant to be the Lord’s, and to live unto Him and serve Him all the days of their life.”^[6]

3.2.3 It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that the language of Confirmation began to make its way in the Church of Scotland, influenced by the usage of the Episcopal Church. By 1923, in *Prayers for Divine Service: By Authority of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland*^[7], the title of the service admitting people to Communion has become *Form and Order for the Confirmation of Baptismal Vows and Admission to the Lord’s Supper*.

3.2.4 The link with Baptism is made explicit here, as a confirmation (by the person when mature enough to confess their own faith) of baptismal vows. But the sense may also be of a confirmation in this rite of the Spirit’s action in Baptism. Hence, Confirmation and Profession of Faith are two aspects of a single service: Confirmation is a rite in which the Holy Spirit’s seal on the individual is symbolically recognised or ‘confirmed,’ and the Profession of Faith is a public commitment to pursue a life of faith in accordance with one’s baptismal vows (or reflecting the vows made by the child’s parents and church family). The ceremony is thus a single event with two theological emphases: the symbolic Confirmation of the Holy Spirit’s seal on the individual’s life, and the public Profession of Faith and commitment to pursue a life of faith and service in the Church. In addition to once functioning as the route of admittance to Communion, Confirmation has also been seen as admitting the individual to all the privileges and responsibilities of membership “within this congregation of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.”^[8] The service includes promises regarding commitment to God and to the church.

3.2.5 Here it is important to note the symbolic nature of the Confirmation rite within the Church of Scotland.

Confirmation has its historical roots in the pre-Reformation Catholic Church, which recognised Confirmation as a sacrament which made a real change in the relationship between the confirmed individual and the Holy Spirit. Because of the distinctively reformed theological approach of the Church of Scotland, Confirmation in the Church is not seen sacramentally: Confirmation is not theologically necessary for a person to receive the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in their life.

3.2.6 However, this historical and theological reality need not be seen as detracting from the theological and pastoral value of Confirmation/Profession of Faith. Rites and practices that enable, facilitate and encourage spiritual growth and maturity within the context of a nurturing community can be affirmed as *theologically meaningful*, even if they are not strictly necessary for a person to exist in right relationship with God. With this in mind, it remains to articulate how the Church might view Confirmation/Profession of Faith as pastorally significant, developmentally meaningful, and communally enriching rites that can be creatively tailored to local and personal contexts.

3.2.7 Within the Church, children have been admitted to Communion since 1992, subject to the approval of the Kirk Session. (As stated above and in our Report of 2018, the Forum would encourage the inclusion of children in Communion). Church of Scotland legislation around Communion is permissive, recognising along with James B. Torrance that “God’s Covenant Love (held out in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper) is unconditioned by any considerations of worth or merit or good works – unconditioned even by faith and repentance.”^[9] Baptism and Communion are *both* ‘signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace,’ operating independently of individual merit and performance. Given this theological logic, there is no requirement in principle for an individual to go through Confirmation/Profession of Faith prior to receiving Communion. Church legislation reflects this theological logic, such that there is no legislative necessity to be confirmed before participating in Communion. In other words, Confirmation/Profession of Faith has been decoupled from Communion, such that unconfirmed people are free to participate in the Lord’s Supper, subject to the policy of the Kirk Session. Again, this is not to *devalue* Communion, but to recognise the nature of the unearned grace received in Communion. In short, the Church recognises that God’s grace goes before us all, prior to our own faith, drawing us to respond to that grace, in faith.

3.2.8 Even though Confirmation/Profession of Faith no longer functions as a requirement for Admission to the Lord’s Supper, there is still significant theological and pastoral warrant to encourage Confirmation and Profession of Faith. First, Confirmation/Profession of Faith is especially important in light of the Church’s practice of infant Baptism. When young children are baptised, they are welcomed into the universal body of Christ, and the local congregation commits to investing in the spiritual nurture and education of such children until such time as they are able and willing to make a personal commitment to Christ and the Church. A baptised infant is not yet capable of understanding doctrinal content or expressing personal faith, but this does not preclude the child from being fully embraced as a child of God and member of the universal church. However, the sacrament of Baptism is undertaken in the hope and expectation that the child will grow in the knowledge of the faith, developing both an awareness of the history, doctrine, and practices of the Christian church, and also a growing sense of personal faith and relationship with God and the Church. Therefore, Confirmation/Profession of Faith can be an important counterpart to the sacrament of Baptism, particularly when an individual has been baptised as an infant.

3.2.9 Second, and relatedly, Confirmation/Profession of Faith can function as an immensely important rite of

passage within the life of an individual. It is often (though not always) the case that an individual is confirmed and makes a Profession of Faith as a young person – a teenager, young adult, or even a pre-teen. These years of adolescence are developmentally pivotal, and significant rites of passage are experienced as particularly powerful, sacred and transformative. This is true not only of the young person’s individual faith life, but also of their sense of belonging and connectedness to the local congregation and universal church. The public act of committing one’s life to Christ and the Church in a Profession of Faith, in making promises of commitment, and the communal embrace and anointing of baptised individuals in Confirmation, can be powerful and important experiences for both individuals and congregations as a whole.

3.3 Practical and Pastoral Considerations

It is important to note that an emphasis on the pastoral importance of Confirmation/Profession of Faith allows plenty of scope for creativity, individuality and pastoral sensitivity to the needs of the individual and congregation. For example, it is increasingly the case that individuals are not baptised as infants, but as young people or adults. In such cases, it is possible that Confirmation classes or enquirers’ classes might be provided prior to Baptism. After this period of preparation there could be a service both of Baptism and Profession of Faith. It is also possible that a single Confirmation/Profession of Faith service might include young people who were baptised as infants, adults who were baptised only a week prior, or even, if appropriate, adults who have been confirmed as a young person but wish to make a new Profession of Faith. Services in the current *Common Order* (1994) of Baptism for an Adult and/or Confirmation (pp. 95-120) offer this helpful flexibility given the different journeys of faith which people make. Further, the education and pastoral support that precede Confirmation/Profession of Faith can be as immersive, creative and dynamic as possible, given the resources of the congregation or Presbytery. Confirmation/Profession of Faith services themselves are also opportunities for creativity and a variety of ways of articulating one’s faith journey. Of course, it is already the case that individuals are continually making ‘unofficial’ professions of faith: public services of Confirmation/Profession of Faith, in some ways, merely recognise and facilitate the growth and commitment that are already present in many lives. Such facilitation can add to the significance of the spiritual growth process not only for the individual, but also for the congregation as a whole.

3.4 Age and Membership

Given that one effect of Confirmation/Profession of Faith is to render the individual a member of the Church of Scotland within a particular congregation, the question of age and membership may arise. Indeed, the Forum was instructed by the General Assembly of 2019 to examine just this question in relation to its work on Baptism, Communion, and Confirmation/Profession of Faith. There is no minimum age requirement for membership of the Church. It is thus imaginable that young people, even pre-teens, might well be confirmed and made full members of the Church within a congregation, stepping into the privileges and responsibilities of membership. After extensive discussion and consideration of these matters, the Forum is not unduly concerned by this possibility. We see no theological reason for an age requirement whose effect is to exclude young people from congregational decision-making processes. Rather, the Forum would urge pastoral discretion on the part of parents, ministers, and Kirk Sessions as young people are known, educated and supported on an individual basis. This recognises individual differences in spiritual, mental and emotional maturity, and allows for appropriate flexibility within individual church families.

3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Forum wishes to reaffirm the theological and pastoral importance of Confirmation and Profession of Faith as vital and powerful opportunities in the lives of individuals and congregations. Confirmation/Profession may no longer be required for admission to Communion, but the educational, spiritual and communal importance of these rites is no less rich for that. As local congregations examine anew the creative and pastorally sensitive possibilities for regularly facilitating Confirmation/Profession of Faith, it is hoped that the congregations as a whole will be encouraged to examine anew pathways of spiritual transformation.

4. RETHINKING INITIAL TRAINING CURRICULUM

The Forum was asked by the Rethinking Initial Training (RIT) group to provide comment on proposals for a new curriculum framework, as part of the ongoing consultation process with academic providers on the future provision of Initial Ministerial Education. After reflection upon the outlined proposals, and through discussion with RIT representatives, the Forum provided written feedback which took into account both academic requirements and the current ecclesial context.

5. CONFERENCES

5.1 The Forum welcomes the following instruction that was received at the 2019 General Assembly:

Encourage the Forum to give consideration to hosting conferences to promote and encourage biblical and theological reflection.

5.2 The Forum is keen to organise future conferences, particularly if it provides the Forum the chance to direct the Church to areas of theological interest that it would like to explore more deeply. However, the Forum is also aware that financial and administrative costs would need to be taken into account.

2020-2021

6. REFLECTIONS ON ONLINE SACRAMENTS

Since the Covid-19 restrictions came into force in March 2020, many Church of Scotland congregations have been meeting for worship online. In the early stages of this transition to online worship, the Theological Forum, along with others in the church, began to consider this practice and to explore some of the theological questions raised by it. In accordance with section (e) of the Forum's remit, 'to stimulate wider theological reflection throughout the Church on key doctrinal, ethical and apologetic matters through the provision of appropriate materials and other activities', the Forum offered 'Reflections on Online Communion'^[10], which was published on the church website in April 2020, and also in the November 2020 Issue of the Church Service Society's *The Record*^[11]. These reflections are not prescriptions, or even firm guidance, but are an initial response to a rapidly developing situation.

7. THE FIVE MARKS OF MISSION

7.1 In May 2020, the Assembly Trustees provided an update report and webinar^[12], detailing their progress in the year since their appointment, and the new challenges and opportunities presented as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was reported that in this time of crisis, the church would need to scale back certain areas of its work, and that to help with this practical task of prioritisation, guidance would be drawn from the Five Marks of Mission, which are as follows:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service

4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

7.2 The Assembly Trustees indicated that for work to continue to be funded, it would need to fall under one or more of the first three marks. If work were to fall under marks 4 or 5, it would need also to fall under 1-3, in "a fusion of proclamation and practice."

7.3 This approach gave rise to debate in the church and the Assembly Trustees invited the Theological Forum to write a brief report on the Five Marks of Mission for the Church of Scotland today. The Report^[13] was published on the church website in August 2020, and concluded that the Five Marks of Mission are definitional, offering "a broad, generous theological vision" for Christian mission, hanging together inseparably in proclamation and service. As such, they are "not particularly suitable for informing specific decisions about resource-allocation." Instead, the process of discernment of strategic priorities requires "a practical wisdom, with an awareness of specific local, regional and national contexts."

7.4 The Forum's contribution helped to inform the approach of the Assembly Trustees in their **Report**^[14] to the 2020 General Assembly. The Five Marks of Mission, along with the Church of Scotland's Vision Statement^[15], were subsequently adopted at the General Assembly as *underpinning* the Faith Action Plan^[16]. It is the Faith Action Plan that "will inform the difficult choices that will have to be made in order to balance the budget", a methodology that reflects the Theological Forum's observation on "pragmatic decision making – requiring practical wisdom."

8. ECOTHEOLOGY

8.1 Part of the Forum's remit is:

- (d) *to draw to the attention of the General Assembly theological matters which the Theological Forum considers to be of pressing contemporary relevance.*

8.2 The Forum is convinced that theological reflection on climate change, and the present ecological crisis more generally, falls clearly within this section of the remit, indeed also as part of our commitment to the fifth Mark of Mission, which is "to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth."

8.3 That this is very much a live and pressing issue within the church today is demonstrated by the instruction received by the Faith Impact Forum in its Report^[17] to the 2020 General Assembly, as follows:

6. *Instruct the Faith Impact Forum to work with others to develop a strategy for the Church to transition both locally and nationally to net zero carbon emissions by 2030, reporting an outline strategy to the General Assembly of 2021.*

8.4 The Theological Forum took the initiative to proceed with work on ecotheology over the last year and, from our reading, discussion and consultation thus far, has identified the need for a robust, in-depth theological context for the ethical commitment to care for creation. The Forum hopes to bring a report on ecotheology to a future General Assembly. It is intended that this theological work be of service to the local church.

8.5 The Forum has also been in dialogue with the Faith Impact Forum over the following instruction received in Faith Impact's Report to the 2020 General Assembly:

8. *Instruct the Forum to report to the General Assembly of 2021 on the ethical, scientific and theological arguments for and against urgent disinvestment from oil and gas companies.*

9. CHURCH BUILDINGS

9.1 The Forum received an enquiry from a church minister in June 2020, asking whether the Forum would consider exploring the theology of church buildings. Then, at the 2020 General Assembly, theological questions around aesthetics, architecture, mission, and the biographical importance of space were raised in relation to the Report of the General Trustees^[18].

9.2 The Forum set up a small Working Group to explore the theology of church buildings and it has since become clear that theological and pastoral considerations, in addition to financial ones, are meaningful and important aspects of this discussion.

9.3 The Forum acknowledges that a reduction in the number of church buildings is necessary. However, it is hoped that an exploration of the theology of church buildings could help congregations to discuss and articulate the importance of their worship spaces, and help to support the decision-making processes of the church.

9.4 Dialogue has been opened with the General Trustees, and the Theological Forum looks forward to exploring this topic further.

10. FUTURE WORK

The Forum stands ready to assist the General Assembly and its Councils, Committees and Fora in any matter of theology and doctrine, and would welcome consultation at an early stage in any significant pieces of work.

11. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Forum is grateful to all those who have sought its views and listened so graciously to its comments. The Forum would also like to express its thanks to all those who participated in and contributed to the conference Westminster, Confessions and the Church. The Forum values the hard work, commitment and contribution of each of its members, and is particularly grateful to Professor Lindsay Sawyer and Professor Scott Spurlock, who both retired from membership at the 2020 General Assembly, and to Rev Dr Jean Kirkwood and Rev Alastair Symington, who will be retiring at this General Assembly.

In the name of the Theological Forum,

DONALD MacEWAN, Convener
LIAM JERROLD FRASER, Vice-Convener
NATHALIE MARES, Secretary

Addendum

Dr Sarah Lane Ritchie

The 2020 General Assembly marked the retirement of Dr Sarah Lane Ritchie as Vice-Convener of the Forum. During her three years in this role, she brought enthusiasm, expertise and rigour to the Forum's conversations, reflection and writing, particularly in contributing to our reports on reconciliation, and on Baptism, Confirmation/Profession of Faith, Communion and membership. We wish her well in her continued service in the academy and the church.

Rev Dr Donald MacEwan

Rev Dr Donald MacEwan completes his term as Convener of the Theological Forum at this year's General Assembly. Donald has served on the Forum since its inception, and prior to becoming Convener served as Vice-Convener. During his Convenorship he has led with wisdom and fairness, fostering open debate, and encouraging all members of the Forum to shape its work. This has enabled the Forum to reach consensus on a number of theological issues, with major reports being written on reconciliation and the Westminster Confession of Faith. He has combined this admirable work with his role as Chaplain of the University of St Andrews,

officiating at weekly services in St Salvator's, and supporting the emotional needs of students and staff. He has blessed the Forum and the Church with his leadership, and we pray God's blessing upon him in his future ministry.

LIAM JERROLD FRASER, Vice-Convener
NATHALIE MARES, Secretary

Appendix

WESTMINSTER, CONFESSIONS AND THE CHURCH (2021)

Following a successful overture to the General Assembly of 2018 regarding the confessional standards of the Church of Scotland, this report is the Theological Forum's interim response to the instruction to us, to review the current confessional position of the Church and explore certain possibilities for change. We discuss the functions of a confession within a reformed context, and offer comparisons with creeds, declarations and other confessions expressing the Christian faith. We examine the Westminster Confession of Faith^[19] in particular – its origins and emphases, and perceptions of its strengths and difficulties. The history is sketched of different forms of subscription to the Westminster Confession over time in Scotland which emerged partly in response to these difficulties, and of twentieth century attempts in the Church to alter the relationship with the Confession found in the status quo set out in the Articles Declaratory. We describe an alternative model for confessional standards found in the Presbyterian Church (USA) – a Book of Confessions – before laying out a range of options which the Church could take. We offer our own preferred option – that those exercising recognised ministries would assent to creeds and the first Article Declaratory, and commit to be guided by a range of confessions including the Westminster Confession, recognising in this commitment liberty of opinion on such points of doctrine as do not enter into the fundamentals of the faith. We believe that this would preserve the essential functions of a confession of faith in a reformed church, as part of an ecumenical context, while recognising personal and theological integrity. We invite responses to the Forum by 31 December this year to help us offer firm proposals to the General Assembly of 2022.

1. Instruction

1.1 The General Assembly of 2018 passed an Overture from the Presbytery of Melrose and Peebles, resulting in the following instruction to the Theological Forum:

Instruct the Forum:

- (1) *to review the reports and debates on the role of the Westminster Confession of Faith in the Church's life arising from the General Assembly of 1968 and the years following;*
- (2) *to give fresh consideration to the issues raised therein in light of developments within Reformed and ecumenical theology since 1646 in which the Church of Scotland has been actively involved;*
- (3) *to advise the General Assembly on the continuing role of a 'Subordinate Standard';*
- (4) *to look afresh at the wording and terms of reference of the Formula of subscription used in services of ordination;*
- (5) *to explore the possibility of producing a Book of Confessions, in print and/or on-line as a teaching resource for office-bearers, members and enquirers;*
- (6) *to report to the General Assembly of 2020.*

1.2 Since then the Theological Forum has been working to fulfil this instruction through reading the Westminster Confession, other creeds, confessions, catechisms and theological statements including the Articles Declaratory, theological reflection on creeds and confessions particularly Westminster, and reports to the General Assembly in this area; through the conference *Westminster, Confessions and the Church*^[20]; through ecumenical engagement with other

reformed churches; through correspondence; and through our own prayerful reflection and discussion. This report is an attempt to offer support and guidance to the Assembly as concisely as possible.

2. The functions of a confession of faith within a reformed church

Any approach to the status of the Westminster Confession of Faith in the Church of Scotland needs to have a grasp of the functions of a confession of faith within a reformed church, acknowledging that the weight of these functions will vary in different historical and geographical contexts. At the very least, these functions are as follows: proclaiming the faith in the society in which the church is found; teaching the faith within the church; providing a standard by which theological orthodoxy can be assessed and error exposed; providing a written standard of orthodox belief by which to judge ministers and elders, both in admitting them to their offices and in sustaining them therein; providing a rallying-point which defines and forms unity within a church and on occasion, society more broadly, and which acts to support opposition to perceived external threats to the church's doctrine, practice and existence. The Bible is the supreme rule of faith and life in reformed understanding; confessions are subordinate standards, subordinate to the Bible.

3. Creeds, confessions and other texts

3.1 Confessions belong to a broader family of documents which define and express Christian faith, including creeds, catechisms and declarations. Creeds, notably the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed, both commonly used liturgically in the Church of Scotland, typically differ from confessions in the following ways. Creeds are shorter, their language more compressed. Creeds emerged from ecumenical councils, and have a universal intention. And creeds are capable of transcending their historical origins – though some confessions may share something of this capacity.

3.2 Other material can also function confessionally. This includes catechisms which often (though need not) use a question and answer format to teach the faith to children and others. In some parts of the church, particularly the Anglican Communion, authorised liturgy shares the confessional functions outlined above, for example in daily offices, prayers and sacramental liturgy and practice. And across the church, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs can have confessional function, usually for the individual believer rather than as a commonly agreed standard.

4. The writing of the Westminster Standards

There is only space here for a brief sketch of the origins of the Westminster Confession and its standing in the Church of Scotland. It was a product of the Westminster Assembly, a committee about 150-strong, set up by the English Parliament in 1643 to advise on religious reform. Within weeks of the Assembly's formation, in the context of Civil War, the English Parliament signed a 'Solemn League and Covenant' with the Scots to resist Charles I. The alliance included a promise to work for religious reform in England and Scotland, 'according to the Word of God and the Example of the best Reformed Churches'. As a result, eleven Scottish commissioners joined the Assembly as non-voting participants. The Confession of Faith was hammered out at the Assembly to construct a common platform for reform, along with the other 'Westminster Standards' (the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the Directory of Public Worship, the Form of Church Government). In England its authority was short-lived: the English Parliament endorsed the Confession in 1648 but its official status was quickly undermined by Cromwell's policy of religious toleration in the 1650s, and ended when the Church of England reaffirmed the Thirty-Nine Articles in 1662. In Scotland it was a different matter. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland adopted the Confession gladly in 1647, and in time it became the touchstone for orthodoxy for its ministers and elders. It is still the principal subordinate standard of belief in the

Church of Scotland, and ministers and elders still subscribe to it when ordained and, for ministers, when inducted to a charge. (See section 9 below for details of subscription.)

5. Westminster Emphases

In 33 chapters, amounting to over 12,000 words, the Westminster Confession confesses the Christian faith with the following significant emphases: scriptural authority for faith; God's sovereignty found in his eternal decree; creation and providence in the light of God's sovereignty; election and predestination; that God has made two covenants – of works and of grace; promise and fulfilment in Christ; limited, penal, substitutionary atonement; the continuation of the moral law; the authority of state. There are no chapters on the Holy Spirit or evangelism. The distinctive theological influence is federalism (*foedus* is Latin for covenant), a development after Calvin, which was influential in reformed theology in the seventeenth century and beyond.

6. Description of Larger and Shorter Catechisms

The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, which also emerged from the Westminster Assembly, cover similar ground in question and answer format, along with teaching the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. The Larger was aimed at the education of adults, the Shorter with children in mind. In many parts of Scotland, the Shorter Catechism has been the principal medium for the learning of Westminster theology, both in English and Gaelic, and was so taught within living memory. Many sermons will still refer to the opening question in the Shorter Catechism:

What is the chief end of man?

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

7. Perceived strengths of the Confession – theologically and symbolically

7.1 There are many people within the Church of Scotland and more broadly in the reformed family who perceive significant strengths in Westminster theology and in its being retained as a standard within the Church. While recognising that the Confession is a human document, they hold that the Confession obediently reflects the teaching of scripture in its covenantal framework for understanding God's relationship with humanity. This faithfulness to scripture they perceive in the Confession's understanding of the sovereignty of God, his will to elect, his power within creation, the role of Jesus as mediator, God's effectual calling of the elect to grace, salvation, and to justification, pardoning their sins for Christ's sake alone, giving them the Spirit of adoption, sanctified, and enabled to believe by the grace of faith; that such pardon requires repentance, that the saved shall persevere to the end, receiving assurance that they are in a state of grace.

7.2 Fundamentally, they see the church's reformed identity reflected in and constituted by the Confession's approach to scripture, the 'rule of faith and life', the Word of God whose author is God, in which the whole counsel of God regarding God's glory, salvation, faith and life is set down or deducible therefrom, and which interprets itself (chapter I). Such reformed identity they further find in the Confession's understandings of ethics, marriage, the church, the sacraments, and the last things. Many find its clear, systematic style and confidence of tone a strength, reflecting confidence in the clarity of divine revelation. Alongside theological considerations, they acknowledge the Confession's long, profound and continuing role in ordering the Church of Scotland (and other reformed churches), preserving the Church's distinctively reformed identity, and maintaining confessional identity with other reformed churches.

8. Difficulties the Confession faces in exercising the functions of a confession in the Church of Scotland

8.1 Almost since the time of its adoption by the General Assembly, the Westminster Confession has given rise to a wide range of objections, to its theological positions, its

status within the Church, and the nature of subscription to it. These include the following principal issues, though this list is not exhaustive.

8.2 There has been severe disagreement over theological positions on election and limited atonement, the sovereignty of God and eternal decrees. These objections are to the central spine of the Confession's theological approach. Opponents believe that the priority given to eternal decrees within the understanding of God leads to unacceptable consequences in doctrine, particularly in holding to predestination. It appears to these opponents that the grace and love of God thereby become secondary to God's sovereignty, that atonement is thereby limited only to those elected in God's eternal decree, that this denies hope of salvation to vast numbers of human beings, not least those who follow other faiths. Opponents believe strongly that the trinitarian revelation of God in scripture makes holding to God's prior commitment to eternal decrees untenable. Furthermore, such an emphasis on God's sovereignty spills over into a doctrine of Providence with very little room for creaturely freedom, or to find helpful explanations for the ongoing presence of so much evil in creaturely life.

8.3 A second and closely related area which has exercised many has been the Confession's approach to scripture. There have been two centuries and more of historical criticism of the Bible, forms of study of scripture which generations of candidates for ministry and others have explored in universities and private study, and which have informed their preaching and teaching. It is clearly now recognised that scripture is interpreted in the church and in theology. While the Westminster divines may well have been aware of the most current scriptural scholarship of their day, the Confession's approach to scripture itself barely recognises the need for interpretation. It was written before the tools of scriptural criticism were established, and it offers a particular pattern of interpretation of scripture which has long been disputed. Biblical study increasingly questioned Westminster presuppositions, for example, doubts over Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch, questioning the literal understanding of the six days of creation as 24 hour periods, or holding that the gospel writers were not themselves eye-witnesses. Indeed, William Robertson Smith was deposed from his Old Testament chair at the Aberdeen Free Church College in 1881 by the General Assembly of the Free Church for publishing the fruits of historical criticism which were believed to be incompatible with the teaching of the Confession.

8.4 A third area of deep concern in much of the world has been the Confession's position on the civil magistrate. In the United States of America, for example, the Confession has been criticised (and indeed amended) for being too open to civil oversight of the church.

8.5 A fourth area of strong disquiet follows in part from the fact that the Confession was written when many of our contemporary concerns had not emerged, particularly issues of mission, social justice, gender, science, climate and the environment. Opponents do not necessarily criticise the Confession for omitting such matters, but they do argue that as the principal subordinate standard, these omissions make the Confession inadequate to serve in such a role.

8.6 A fifth criticism often made is over the form of the Confession. Many people doubt that a document of this length, level of detail, confidence and force should have such a significant status within the church. Such a maximal text encourages narrow boundaries within belief, in areas of faith which have generated a vastly broader range of theological positions both before and after the writing of the Confession. There are many other ways in which Christians, even reformed Christians, have understood God's love, sovereignty, election, atonement and salvation – the most contentious matters – but also questions of moral theology and church life which the Confession lays down. Even though

the Confession articulates a form of reformed faith which resonates with some in the Church, there are many more who cannot in good conscience say that it truly expresses their faith in Jesus Christ.

8.7 A sixth criticism, that the Confession's polemic against the Roman Catholic Church made it deeply unhelpful in fostering good ecumenical relations and an anti-sectarian spirit, was addressed by the Assembly of 1986 which passed a Declaratory Act dissociating itself from the intemperate language employed by the Confession when referring to the Pope, the Mass and the Roman Catholic Church.

8.8 These and other criticisms have led many to question the need or indeed the rightness for ministers and elders to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith.

9. The necessity for various holding positions, including Articles Declaratory, up to the current Formula of subscription

9.1 The centuries following the adoption of the Westminster Confession saw the objections described above coming to the fore in debate, including trials for heresy in different Presbyterian churches. Reformed churches in Scotland found different ways of qualifying subscription to the Confession to make room for disquiet over the role of the civil magistrate, and over scriptural and theological concerns, particularly over predestination, limited atonement and the hope of salvation, and over increasingly scientific understandings of creation. The United Presbyterian Church passed a Declaratory Act in 1879 which they hoped would check and counterbalance some of the implications of the Confession, and which introduced "liberty of opinion" on such points in the Standards "not entering into the substance of the faith." The Free Church passed a similar Declaratory Act in 1892, while the Church of Scotland in 1910 changed its Formula of subscription to soften acceptance of Westminster in its entirety.

9.2 This process culminated in the Articles Declaratory of the Church of Scotland, which – along with the Basis and Plan of Union – paved the way for the Union of 1929, and forms the constitution of the present-day Church of Scotland. In the Articles Declaratory, the Church of Scotland sought to define its identity not only in relation to the State but in relation to its own reformed heritage and that of the Catholic – i.e. Universal – Church. These questions became most pronounced in discussions surrounding the First Article Declaratory. On the one hand were those who, in faithfulness to the ecumenical creeds and reformed tradition, argued for constraints to be placed on the Church's ability to alter its doctrine and redefine its core identity. On the other hand, some sought to maximise the Church's ability to reform its doctrine and self-understanding in light of present experience and knowledge, and not to be bound by the thought of previous times.^[21] A compromise was found in the First Article Declaratory. Specific fundamentals of the Catholic faith – Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, and the Word of God contained in Scripture – were declared to be unalterable and of the substance of the faith. Yet this list of fundamentals was not intended to be exhaustive, and no specific creed or confession is mentioned in the First Article. As such, when office holders of the Church of Scotland are ordained, inducted, or admitted, they make vows and subscribe to a set of fundamental doctrines contained in the First Article Declaratory, which – following the Seventh Article Declaratory – cannot be modified in any way.^[22]

9.3 The Articles Declaratory of the Church of Scotland further set forth the Formula by which elders and ministers subscribe to the Confession. It is worth laying out the relevant parts of the Articles Declaratory in full:

- I. *The Church of Scotland is part of the Holy Catholic or Universal Church; worshipping one God, Almighty, all-wise, and all-loving, in the Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; adoring the Father, infinite in Majesty, of whom are all things; confessing our Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, made very man for our salvation; glorying in His Cross and Resurrection, and owning obedience to Him as the Head over all things to His Church; trusting in the promised renewal and guidance of the Holy Spirit; proclaiming the forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God through faith in Christ, and the gift of Eternal Life; and labouring for the advancement of the Kingdom of God throughout the world. The Church of Scotland adheres to the Scottish Reformation; receives the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as its supreme rule of faith and life; and avows the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith founded thereupon.*
- II. *The principal subordinate standard of the Church of Scotland is the Westminster Confession of Faith approved by the General Assembly of 1647, containing the sum and substance of the Faith of the Reformed Church. Its government is Presbyterian, and is exercised through Kirk Sessions; Presbyteries, [Provincial Synods deleted by Act V, 1992], and General Assemblies. Its system and principles of worship, orders, and discipline are in accordance with "The Directory for the Public Worship of God," "The Form of Presbyterial Church Government" and "The Form of Process," as these have been or may hereafter be interpreted or modified by Acts of the General Assembly or by consuetude.*
- V. *This Church has the inherent right, free from interference by civil authority, but under the safeguards for deliberate action and legislation provided by the Church itself, to frame or adopt its subordinate standards, to declare the sense in which it understands its Confession of Faith, to modify the forms of expression therein, or to formulate other doctrinal statements, and to define the relation thereto of its office-bearers and members, but always in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said Confession, of which agreement the Church shall be sole judge, and with due regard to liberty of opinion in points which do not enter into the substance of the Faith.*

9.4 As for the words used in services of ordination and induction, these are as follows:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King and Head of the Church, Who, being ascended on high, has given gifts to God's people for the edifying of the body of Christ, we are met here as a Presbytery to ordain A. B. to the office of the Holy Ministry by prayer and the laying on of hands by the Presbyters to whom it belongs, and to induct him/her into the pastoral charge.

In this act of ordination the Church of Scotland, as part of the Holy Catholic or Universal Church worshipping One God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — affirms anew its belief in the Gospel of the sovereign grace and love of God, wherein through Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen, He freely offers to all people, upon repentance and faith, the forgiveness of sins, renewal by the Holy Spirit, and eternal life, and calls them to labour in the fellowship of faith for the advancement of the Kingdom of God throughout the world.

The Church of Scotland acknowledges the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the supreme rule of faith and life.

The Church of Scotland holds as its subordinate standard the Westminster Confession of Faith, recognising liberty of opinion on such points of doctrine as do not enter into the substance of the Faith, and claiming the right, in dependence on the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, to formulate, interpret,

or modify its subordinate standards: always in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said Confession — of which agreement the Church itself shall be sole judge.

9.5 Questions to be put to Minister about to be ordained/inducted.

1. *Do you believe in one God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and do you confess anew the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord?*
2. *Do you believe the Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to be the supreme rule of faith and life?*
3. *Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church?*
4. *Do you acknowledge the Presbyterian Government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God; and do you promise to be subject in the Lord to this Presbytery and to the superior Courts of the Church, and to take your due part in the administration of its affairs?*
5. *Do you promise to seek the unity and peace of this Church; to uphold the doctrine, worship, government, and discipline thereof; and to cherish a spirit of love towards all your brothers and sisters in Christ?*
6. *Are not zeal for the glory of God, love to the Lord Jesus Christ, and a desire for the salvation of all people, so far as you know your own heart, your great motives and chief inducements to enter into the office of the Holy Ministry?*
7. *Do you engage in the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ to live a godly and circumspect life; and faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully to discharge the duties of your ministry, seeking in all things the advancement of the Kingdom of God?*
8. *Do you accept and close with the call to be Pastor of this charge, and promise through grace to study to approve yourself a faithful Minister of the Gospel among this people?*

9.6 Question to Elders on Ordination and Admission.

Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith; do you promise to seek the unity and peace of this Church; to uphold its doctrine, worship, government and discipline; and to take your due part in the administration of its affairs?

9.7 The Formula which is signed by Ministers, Elders, Deacons and Readers.

I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church.

I acknowledge the Presbyterian government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God, and promise that I will submit thereto and concur therewith.

I promise to observe the order of worship and the administration of all public ordinances as the same are or may be allowed in this Church.

9.8 In short, the status quo is as follows:

- The Word of God contained in the Bible is the supreme rule of faith and life in the Church.
- The Church avows the fundamental doctrines of the faith contained in the Confession of Faith as specified by Article Declaratory I.
- The Westminster Confession is the principal subordinate standard.
- Ministers in being ordained and inducted assent that the Word of God is the supreme rule of faith and life.

- Ministers in being ordained and inducted further assent that they believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church.
- That Confession is the Westminster Confession, with the significant qualification – *recognising liberty of opinion on such points of doctrine as do not enter into the substance of the Faith*.
- Elders, deacons and readers also assent to belief in the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the [Westminster] Confession of Faith of this Church, subject to the same qualification as for ministers.

10. The central problem with the status quo

10.1 The obvious questions here are – What is the substance of the faith? What points of doctrine in the Westminster Confession do or do not enter into that substance? Neither the Articles Declaratory, nor any of the formularies used in inaugurating different ministries answer these questions explicitly. This allows ministers and others, who assent publicly to belief in the fundamental doctrines contained in the Confession, to feel able to do so even when they disagree with doctrines in the Confession. In signing the Formula, they rest their conscience on liberty of opinion.

10.2 For some this may be awkward but preserves a breadth of theological opinion among ministers and elders within the Church. For others it is a bad witness, that something can be so fundamental to the Church's identity with such a significant status in our Church constitution and in our understanding of what our ministers, elders and others believe, and yet which can be disregarded or profoundly disagreed with by people in various ministries. It is barely studied or even read by most people preparing for ordination, and lacks respect across much of the Church.

10.3 It is clear that, generally speaking within the Church of Scotland as a whole, the Westminster Confession in practice no longer exercises the functions of a confession in a reformed church, as laid out above – proclaiming the faith in society; teaching the faith within the church; providing a standard by which theological orthodoxy can be assessed and error exposed, and by which ministers and elders are judged; or defining and expressing unity internally and against external threats to the church.

11. 1968 to the present day: a resumé of attempts at change

11.1 Recognising these serious difficulties, from the late 1960s to the early 1990s a series of attempts were made to make changes to the status quo. Work done by the Panel on Doctrine was presented to a number of General Assemblies with the following proposed changes: removing references to a subordinate standard, adding the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as "declarations of the faith of the Universal Church"; declaring the Scots and Westminster Confessions to be "historic statements of the faith of the Reformed Church"; providing a set of doctrines defining the substance of the faith, and offering a series of more modern statements of Christian belief. In the end, while the General Assembly authorised in 1992 a new Statement of Christian Faith which is printed in the endpapers of the current edition of *Common Order*, it did not ultimately agree to any change in the status of the Westminster Confession.

11.2 It is important to recognise that opposition to change came from at least two broad groups in the Church. Proponents of reformed orthodoxy wanted no diminution in the status of Westminster as principal subordinate standard and in the implied status of its theological emphases. But many who would have understood themselves as liberal or progressive wanted no further defining of the substance of the faith, preferring the breadth of theological difference which the liberty of opinion clause appears to supply. It was this alliance that proved at a number of Assemblies to have enough weight and influence to prevent significant change.

11.3 Having reviewed the reports across these decades from the Panel of Doctrine, we find them to be part of a lengthy, unhurried and genuinely consultative process that encouraged theological discussion and engagement at the level of Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions. In many ways the debates have not changed radically since then, but our context is not the same forty, indeed fifty years on – internally in the Church of Scotland, ecumenically, and in relation to society. Nevertheless, their tone – eirenic, patient, open to views from across the Church theologically and geographically – remains a helpful model for today.

12. Exploration of the experience of the PC(USA) in having a Book of Confessions

12.1 The deliverance to the Forum instructs us in section (5) to explore the possibility of producing a Book of Confessions, in print and/or on-line as a teaching resource for office-bearers, members and enquirers.

12.2 The Presbyterian Church (USA) has a Book of Confessions, and so it will be helpful to explore their experience. For them there is a largely positive meaning in having multiple confessions in the following ways.

12.3 First, they are glad to be a confessional church as the confessions express normatively who they are, what they believe, and what they resolve to do. Such confessions speak inwardly to the church, helping the church understand these questions for itself. They also speak outwardly as a depiction of the church's self-understanding with which others can engage.

12.4 Second, they see plurality as normal, plurality in how they express who they are, what they believe and what they resolve to do. No single creed or confession can sufficiently capture the breadth of their church in these fundamental questions. Moreover, no statement is final or infallible, so having a plurality ensures that each confession is open to the critique of the others, confirming their provisionality and fallibility, but also revealing their overlapping and divergent emphases, strengths and significance.

12.5 Third, a Book of Confessions is not parochial. Only two of the 12 documents originated in the USA – having so many originating elsewhere situates the church not only in the physical geography and history of the United States, but of the church throughout the world and across history.

12.6 Fourth, a Book of Confessions is unfinished. There is no back cover, as they put it. New documents have been added, and could be again, by agreement of the church. As the PC(USA) recognises, new confessions arise when there is an urgent need to clarify the faith from distortion, when under attack, or when there is new insight. All such situations could arise in the future.

12.7 A key question is where authority rests in a variety of standards. This is a question which leads us to examine the Formula of subscription or other ways of relating to the texts in the Book. American Presbyterian ordinands, before the development of a Book of Confessions, were asked, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the [Westminster Confession] as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?" But now two of the questions asked at ordination are:

- "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?"
- And "Will you fulfil your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and continually guided by our Confessions?"

12.8 In other words, they are to be guided by the confessions, but their obedience to Christ and instruction by scripture are prior in importance.

12.9 The PC(USA) sees in this the preservation of freedom and variety in the church, given the plurality of confessions and the absence of a defined list of essential tenets of the reformed faith. But they also see the preservation of authority and unity of the church in this approach. Scripture is the supreme standard of faith, but the confessions are also standards, albeit subordinate. The church's consensus (at the level of General Assemblies, synods and presbyteries) on the meaning of the confessions remains authoritative – and those who are ordained do not have unlimited freedom of interpretation.

13. Brief examination of a range of creeds and confessions

13.1 Clearly the question as to which creeds and confessions are included in any Book of Confessions is part and parcel of the question as to whether to have a plurality at all. We briefly set a number out below, in chronological order, again making no claims to be exhaustive.

13.2 *Nicene Creed*. This was agreed at an ecumenical council in Constantinople in 381 drawing on an earlier creed promulgated in Nicaea in 325. It is affirmed by most Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church except for a significant disagreement over one word in the Latin text – *filioque*. The addition of this word, indicating belief that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and from the Son* (*filioque*), is not accepted in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. *Common Order* encourages congregational affirmation of the Nicene Creed in services of Holy Communion.

13.3 *Apostles' Creed*. Attaining its final form in the eighth century, this creed, while not written by the apostles, reflects very early Christian theological formulations. Successive versions were used by baptismal candidates in affirming their faith, and indeed *Common Order* still encourages congregational affirmation of the Apostles' Creed in the sacrament of Baptism.

13.4 *Scots Confession*. This was written in four days in 1560 at the request of the Scottish Parliament by six ministers, but is largely the work of John Knox. It was the principal subordinate standard of the Church of Scotland until superseded by the Westminster Confession in 1647. Distinctively reformed, the confession begins with the triune God, before expounding the principal points of Christian doctrine giving particular weight to those questions on which the reformers diverged from the Roman Church. The writers make it clear that scripture is paramount, and the confession very much secondary. Indeed in the preface they make the following request: "gif onie man will note in this our confessioun onie Artickle or sentence repugnant to Gods halie word, that it wald pleis him of his gentleness and for christian charities sake to admonish us of the same in writing." This reformed understanding of the Church was underpinned by the reception of the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1561, adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1566) and the wide use of the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563).

13.5 *Westminster Confession of Faith*. This has been discussed in detail above.

13.6 *Short Statement of the Church's Faith*. Written by a committee convened by H. R. Mackintosh, and drawing on work from the United Free Church, this statement was approved by the General Assembly in 1935. Little known today, this is an intriguing work, which, as David Ferguson noted in his conference paper, is "trinitarian, Christocentric, sacramental, ecumenical, and engaged with the more critical social theology that had emerged in the churches by the earlier twentieth century."^[23]

13.7 *Barmen Declaration*. This was written and agreed, following a number of regional meetings, in May 1934 in

Barmen, Wuppertal, Germany. In six propositions, it proclaims the church's freedom in Jesus Christ, the Lord of every area of life. It was written in strong opposition to the "German Christians" who believed that the ideals of Hitler's National Socialism were in harmony with the Christian faith. The Declaration has proved inspirational in many different contexts when churches and Christians have felt under significant pressure to conform to political ideologies.

13.8 *Belhar Confession*. This was adopted in 1986 in South Africa, written by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the "coloured" church created by the Dutch Reformed Church. It emphasises the singleness of the human family, the call to reconciliation and unity in the church, and the divine desire for justice, and it rejects enforced separation of people. This Confession has been influential in contexts of racial and other separation between people.

13.9 *A Statement of Christian Faith (1992)*. Mentioned above, this emerged from the last sustained exploration of the Westminster Confession in the Church of Scotland. Authorised for use in worship and teaching by the General Assembly of 1992, it follows broadly the layout of the Apostles' Creed while explicitly affirming in the third line that "God is love."

14. Options

14.1 To recap: we have explored the functions of confessions in a reformed context, the relationship which the Church of Scotland has had with the Westminster Confession, its emphases, perceived strengths and weaknesses, and the difficulties which have led to the current Formula of subscription with its significant liberty of opinion clause. We have described attempts to change the status quo over the past 50 years, and an alternative model from within Presbyterianism, the PC(USA) which is constituted by a Book of Confessions, with a significantly different form of subscription from the Church of Scotland's.

14.2 The Theological Forum has been asked not only to bring fresh consideration of these issues before the General Assembly but to advise the Assembly on the Formula of subscription. We wish to do so as follows: by teasing out the different parts which need to be assessed in any proposal; by offering some options as to ways forward (recognising that no such list could be exhaustive), by suggesting an approach which the Forum, following our deliberations, considers to offer the best way forward, and by then inviting the Church to spend time considering this report and the options we lay out, and to share these reflections with us to help produce firm proposals for a subsequent Assembly to consider.

14.3 There is a fairly complicated set of considerations which lie before us. The following parts will all need to be part of a coherent approach:

- What document(s) should be named in the Articles Declaratory as subordinate standards, if any?
- What form of relationship, subscription or otherwise, should ministers, elders, deacons, readers and others have with the subordinate standard(s)?
- Will each text have the same status, or could there be different levels of relationship?
- What status should liberty of opinion have?
- What should be said in the liturgies which inaugurate ministries?

14.4 We now lay out a number of basic possible options for the way forward, considering advantages and drawbacks, bearing in mind ecumenical considerations. We have chosen a number of options ranging from the status quo to the addition of other documents, with or without the writing of a new text, to give a sense as to how the considerations described above might work in practice in different combinations. This list is not exhaustive and some options could be slightly amended, or indeed could exist together with others.

15. Option (a) The status quo

15.1 This may appeal both to defenders of reformed orthodoxy, who like the retention of the Confession as principal subordinate standard, and (somewhat ironically) to those who wish not to subscribe to many of the tenets of reformed orthodoxy, and who favour the absence of a definitive description of the substance of the faith. It has the possible advantage that the very inconsistency regarding the Confession somehow holds the Church together. It may also appeal to those who feel that in a time of significant decline in the Church, and change in patterns of church life, ministry and central organisation, there is a lack of energy to embark on confessional change as well.

15.2 However, given the significance of the change which the Church is undergoing both within its own experience and in the context of society as a whole, there are strong arguments that our theological standards need to be assessed, and be augmented, as part of the ongoing process of being reformed. Moreover the main drawback of the status quo becomes more apparent as the years pass. How can it be good for a Church, whose people seek to worship God in Spirit and in truth, to subscribe to a Confession when many and possibly most of the Church's ministers and elders are convinced that in subscribing to it they do not have to believe it? Indeed such inconsistency embedded in church culture may inhibit exploration of the fundamental beliefs that form theological identity, and so prevent the Church from understanding itself, and expressing its identity more widely.

16. Option (b) The Westminster Confession as the sole principal guiding document but without a Formula of subscription, no matter how attenuated

16.1 In this option ministers and elders would affirm their Christian faith as they currently do in ordination vows (and their equivalents) but without these fundamental doctrines being defined by the Westminster Confession. Rather the Confession would be cited as the principal guiding document.

16.2 This would have the advantage of removing the main problem of the status quo – its inconsistency – while allowing those whose faith is significantly guided by the Confession to affirm that as part of their ministry, given its immense historical significance for the Church.

16.3 However in the absence of subscription, would the Confession have any salient function within the Church? Would that cause a significant breach with other churches in the reformed family?

17. Option (c) Dependence on Article Declaratory I

17.1 This approach would be similar to option (b) but would remove all reference to the Westminster Confession. Instead it would explicitly make reference to the summary of Christian faith in the First Article Declaratory (and possibly the Nicene and Apostles' Creed) as the faith to which the Church of Scotland adheres. However there would be no subscription in the services of ordination, induction and equivalents for ministries in the Church.

17.2 A possible benefit of this approach for some is that it would remove any lingering sense that the Westminster Confession has a particular role over and above any other historical confession, reformed or otherwise. Ecumenically it would reaffirm the Church of Scotland's identity within the Church Catholic.

17.3 However it may be seen as a clear drawback that removing all reference to the Confession will undercut the Church's identity as a reformed church. There is much more to a reformed identity than subscription to the theological framework of Westminster, but there is also more to a reformed identity than belonging to the Church Catholic. Even if the Westminster Confession offers a partial, historic expression of reformed theology, it would still *bereformed* aspects of the Confession that disappear from the Church of

Scotland's avowed identity if replaced with the Creeds and/or the First Article Declaratory.

18. Option (d) Retaining the Westminster Confession and adding further existing documents to a set of creeds and confessions with which the Church would be in formal relationship

18.1 This approach is a development of the proposed change which was brought to the General Assembly in the 1970s and which fell at the final hurdle. The Westminster Confession would be retained, but other documents would be added to the texts with which the Church would be in a formal relationship. These could include the ecumenical creeds, other reformed confessions, and other declarations and documents of faith from the Church of Scotland and beyond. A clear model for this is the Presbyterian Church (USA).

18.2 If the Church decides to broaden its named and acknowledged confessions from the Westminster Confession alone, how would that relationship be defined and articulated in services inaugurating ministries? We have noted that in the status quo, subscription has been seen for over 200 years as problematic, hence the allowance of liberty of opinion, arguably evacuating subscription of meaning. Subscription to a broad range of creeds, confessions and other texts seems to be equally in need of conscience clauses, if not more so, and equally as open to the critique made of the status quo. By contrast the approach taken in the PC(USA) removes the constraint of subscription but still ensures that ministers are "continually guided" by their (Book of) Confessions.

18.3 Note that one of the problems of *subscription* to a Confession is that it tends to see the Confession as nearly uncontested. All deviations from it are assumed to be mistaken unless proved otherwise. While there may be a theoretical possibility of arguing against a theological position in a confession on the grounds of scripture or the Lordship of Christ, in practice the Westminster Confession has functioned as being so close a proxy for scripture or Christ that such arguments are rarely successful. The history of heresy trials in the nineteenth century church in Scotland makes that clear.

18.4 To be *guided* by confessions, by contrast, seems a more fruitful way of integrating their insights with the ongoing revelation of God in scripture and as Christ is encountered in contemporary life. *Guided* maintains a position between, for example, being *accompanied*, which may lack the important sense of the confessions leading us, and, for example, *instructed*, which may be thought to lower the input of ministers or elders in exploring their faith for themselves.

18.5 A key potential difficulty with this is complexity in being guided by a number of confessions which have different emphases and positions, and which are not always in agreement with each other. And so it could be seen as a drawback that a set of confessions lacks agreement as to the essential tenets of faith. This may be thought to encourage a 'pick and choose' mentality, and make discipline difficult to maintain. Moreover, there are clearly questions over when, how and by whom documents would be added to the number. A further drawback could be the length and complexity of a Book of Confessions, which could deter some from engaging with the texts.

19. Option (e) A new confessional document, written from now within the Church of Scotland with ecumenical involvement

19.1 The Forum has also considered whether this is the time to consider the development of a new confessional text for the Church of Scotland with ecumenical partners. Confessions arise in times of theological ferment when there are competing accounts of the truth, in times of opposition from or to society or political authority, or when a new

church emerges which needs to articulate its theological identity, declare its boundaries and form unity among its ministers and members.

19.2 From these categories the clearest which could be thought to apply to the Church at this time is that of opposition from society – an opposition which can be exercised directly but is also found in indifference. The Forum is aware of the transformation taking place across the Church – rapid decline in members, Baptisms, weddings, Professions of Faith/Confirmations, ministers and charges, smaller congregations, a shrinking centre, the closure of church buildings, the loss of influence.

19.3 In the light of this transformation, there could be much to be gained in the development of a new confession, not least the encouragement of theological engagement at many levels across different age-groups within the church in Scotland. Such an expression may well be in contemporary language and media, reflecting concerns which previous confessions have not considered important enough to include – for example social justice, gender equality, and environmental concern. It may well bring to bear new insights into God which have emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, helping us see the Westminster concerns of sovereignty and election in intriguingly new ways.

19.4 On the other hand, there is clearly a danger that the Church may not enjoy enough theological unity to produce a confession which would find broad support, or the energy to sustain its development. Indeed the attempt to agree a new statement could be counter-productive, taking up much valuable time and energy, and generating unhelpful tensions in the Church.

20. Option (f) Assent to creeds and the First Article Declaratory, and guidance from a set of confessions – the Forum’s preferred option

20.1 At this stage in our reflection on the instruction from the General Assembly, the Forum believes that it is time for change in the Church’s confessional position. We are minded to encourage the Church to adopt a combination of the approaches explored in options (c) and (d). In other words, we favour holding the ecumenical creeds (Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed) and Article Declaratory I as the subordinate standards to which ministers, elders and people in other ministries would assent, alongside the selection of a set of confessions and texts which the Church would formally acknowledge. In its early decades, the reformed Church of Scotland acknowledged a number of creeds and confessions – the Apostles’ Creed, the Scots Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism – and while the Scots Confession was superseded by the Westminster in 1647, it was never revoked. Adopting a set of documents now would be a return to the beginnings of reformed confessional practice in Scotland. At this stage the Forum has not arrived at a definitive sense as to which texts we would advise should be included in any Book of Confessions, and we look forward to reading responses from the Church on this question. Nor have we been sufficiently persuaded that this is the right time for the sustained collaborative work which any new statement would require, given the risks outlined above in section 19 – option (e) – though in principle we favour an open set of confessions to which others can be added.

20.2 Ministers and other office-bearers, as part of the service inaugurating their ministry – ordination or equivalent – would acknowledge acceptance of this set of confessions. At this stage we are drawn to the PC(USA)’s language of being “continually guided” by the Confessions. This set of confessions would include the Westminster Confession, and other confessions reflecting the Church’s reformed identity, and its relationship with Scotland.

20.3 A possible wording for the third question to ordinands could be:

Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith set out in the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed and First Article Declaratory of this Church? Answer – I do.

20.4 A new fourth question might then be:

Will you be guided by the confessions in the Church’s Book of Confessions, recognising liberty of opinion on such points of doctrine as do not enter into the fundamentals of the Faith? Answer – I will.

20.5 This approach or something similar seems to us to retain the central functions of a confession in a reformed church – proclaiming the faith in society; teaching the faith within the church; providing a standard by which theological orthodoxy can be assessed and error exposed; and defining and expressing unity internally and against external threats to the church. It avoids the two clearest difficulties of the status quo – first, the lack of adherence by ministers and elders today to the Church’s principal subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession, and second, because of the liberty of opinion clause, the absence of any clear summary of faith to which the ordained can be expected to adhere. It retains liberty of opinion for confessions but not for the fundamental doctrines of the faith. It retains scripture as the supreme rule of faith and life but broadens the range of theological interpretations of scripture which can inform us today, and which is in principle open to new expressions of the faith. It confirms the Church of Scotland’s Catholic identity and strengthens its broader ecumenical relationships in adherence to the creeds, and confirms its reformed identity in the Book of Confessions by which we are guided. The Book of Confessions would indeed, as our instruction suggested, be a teaching resource for office-bearers, members and enquirers, particularly if made available online.

20.6 In both assenting to belief in the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the ecumenical creeds and First Article Declaratory, and in promising to be guided by the confessions, there is room for interpretation. The Church recognises that each person being ordained will interpret the creeds, fundamental doctrines and confessions. But they will do so in the light of scripture as the supreme rule of faith and life, and under the authority of the Church to which they belong. This proposal maintains the Church’s acceptance of constrained difference in its recent decision-making where people sincerely disagree over matters of doctrine and practice.

21. Legal questions

The Forum has consulted with the Legal Questions Committee over an earlier draft of this report. They have confirmed that it is legally possible for the Church of Scotland to alter, exchange, or remove its subordinate standard, using provisions stipulated in the Articles Declaratory, very probably involving a double Barrier Act process as set out in Article VIII. This means that the proposed change would require the approval of the General Assembly, then two-thirds of Presbyteries in two successive years, before final approval by the General Assembly. Furthermore it is legally possible for the Church of Scotland to alter, exchange, or remove its Formula of subscription for office holders, again as laid out in the Articles Declaratory. The particular form of Barrier Act mechanism required would depend on the precise nature of the change proposed.

22. Difference and reconciliation

22.1 The Forum is conscious that we are recommending significant change which will not necessarily be welcomed by all. But whether or not any change takes place over the status of the Westminster Confession, debating these questions may give rise to serious disagreement. We began our deliberations on these questions while in the midst of writing a report on reconciliation in the church, which was a helpful overlap of subjects. A quotation from that Report^[24] which was received by the General Assembly of 2019 may be of benefit:

We are never called in our faith to throw our hands up in despair at the lack of reconciliation between people, communities, factions and churches who have come to blows, and in whom bitterness remains. Instead, we are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation, calling people to accept the reconciliation from God and for that to flow into their human relations. We do not stop praying the Lord's Prayer because it is hard. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. It is because it is hard that it is a prayer – we offer it to God, trusting that there are resources of grace beyond us which are shared with us, in our need.

We do so in the knowledge that reconciliation does happen, sometimes slowly, usually imperfectly, within the church. Other issues which have been lightning rods for disagreement, conflict and division have settled down over time, as people continue to live together in fellowship despite different views. Examples are patronage in the Church, ecumenical engagement with Roman Catholics and other Christians, divorce and the remarriage of divorced people, and women's ordination. While debate... may continue, the tone may increasingly be a calmer one of a reconciled community learning what it means to have taken a series of decisions and stayed together despite significant disagreement.

22.2 We learned in preparing that Report that disagreeing well and living together in reconciliation is more likely to happen in organisations including churches which allow time for people to talk, to know each other, to listen and understand the other's perspective, which allow space to talk of truth and justice, which do not rush to judgment, and which encourage decision-making by consensus. We would hope that these principles have been part (imperfectly no doubt) of the Forum's own deliberations so far, and will guide the Church's ongoing discussions of these issues.

23. Recommendation

23.1 Our recommendation therefore is that this report go to Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions for discussion, with the following questions, inviting responses to the Theological Forum by 31 December 2021. That timescale will allow the Forum to read and consider every response, and produce a report for the 2022 Assembly with firm proposals for the way forward.

- (i) Do you favour any of the options laid out in sections 15-20?
- (ii) Would you like to see any of the options combined?
- (iii) Are there any further options you would suggest as a good way forward?
- (iv) If you favour a set of creedal and confessional documents with which the Church would be in relationship, which documents would you like to see included? The texts described in section 13 will be available at <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/councils-committees-and-departments/committees/theological-forum> for consideration but other texts may be considered as well.
- (v) If you favour a new statement of faith, what aspects of the Christian faith would you like to see explored within it?

23.2 The Forum would then hope to bring a report to the 2022 General Assembly with proposals emerging from this 2021 report, its reception by the Assembly, and responses by Presbyteries, Kirk Sessions and by other interested parties.

References

- [1] Keynote speakers included Very Rev Principal Stafford Carson (Union Theological College), Professor David Fergusson (University of Edinburgh), Professor Paul T Nimmo (University of Aberdeen) and Professor Amy Plantinga Pauw (Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary). The conference papers have since been published in the journal *Theology in Scotland* and are available in digital format at the following web address: <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/TIS/issue/view/188>
- [2] "Together at the Table", Mission and Discipleship Council, Church of Scotland, 2019. Available in hard copy and in digital format at the following web address: https://churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/62992/Together-at-the-Table-booklet.pdf
- [3] See "Together at the Table" https://churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/62992/Together-at-the-Table-booklet.pdf
- [4] Act V.15, Consolidating Act Anent The Sacraments http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1839/2000_act_05.pdf
- [5] http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/50214/Theological_Forum.pdf
- [6] <https://www.churchservicesociety.org/sites/default/files/journals/1938-1939-17-21.pdf>, p. 18.
- [7] See <https://www.churchservicesociety.org/sites/default/files/journals/1938-1939-17-21.pdf>, p. 19.
- [8] See the current *Common Order* (1994), p. 116.
- [9] James B. Torrance, "Some Theological Grounds for Admitting Children to the Lord's Table," in *Children at the Table*, ed. by David G. Hamilton and Finlay A. J. Macdonald, (Edinburgh: The Church of Scotland, 1982), p.5.
- [10] <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/councils-committees-and-departments/committees/theological-forum/reflections-on-online-communion>
- [11] <http://churchservicesociety.org/publications/record>
- [12] <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/our-structure/assembly-trustees/may-2020-update-report-and-webinar>
- [13] https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/69749/Church-of-Scotland-Theological-Forum-Five-Marks-of-Mission.pdf
- [14] https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/70111/3601-GA-Reports-to-the-General-Assembly-2020-V6.2.pdf, pp. 55-78.
- [15] <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us>
- [16] https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/70111/3601-GA-Reports-to-the-General-Assembly-2020-V6.2.pdf, pp. 62-68.
- [17] https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/70111/3601-GA-Reports-to-the-General-Assembly-2020-V6.2.pdf, pp. 78-97.
- [18] https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/70111/3601-GA-Reports-to-the-General-Assembly-2020-V6.2.pdf, pp. 103-123.
- [19] Full text can be found here: <https://www.pcaac.org/bco/westminster-confession/>
- [20] See endnote ^[1] for details

- [21] See Douglas Murray, *Freedom to Reform: The 'Articles Declaratory' of the Church of Scotland 1921*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), pp. 43-67.
- [22] Andrew Herron, *The Law and Practice of the Kirk: A Practical Guide and Commentary*, (Glasgow: Chapter House, 1995), p. 360 and James L. Weatherhead ed., *The Constitution and Laws of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1997), pp. 18-19.
- [23] David Fergusson, "A Subordinate Standard: Where Next?" p. 53. <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/TIS/article/view/1875/1394>
- [24] <https://ga.churchofscotland.org.uk/storage/uploads/theological-forum.pdf>, p. 9.