

THEOLOGICAL FORUM

May 2016

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.

REPORT

1. Introduction

1.1 The Theological Forum is one of the General Assembly's newest committees, established by the General Assembly of 2013 '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 assists other committees, when invited, by commenting on their projects and draft reports; by raising

issues itself; and by writing reports at the instruction of the General Assembly. At thirteen members, the Forum is relatively small and for the last three years it has benefited greatly from being able to have Mrs Pauline Weibye as its Acting Secretary. Amid the many other demands on her time, Mrs Weibye has brought a wide knowledge of the Church and a compassionate understanding of its mission and processes. The Forum as a whole acknowledges its debt to her and expresses its gratitude.

2. Issues

2.1 Subjects brought to the Forum have included the draft report of the Eldership Working Group entitled "Developing the Eldership" and the draft report of the Church and Society Council on the Corporal Punishment of Children. The Why Believe? Group of the Mission and Discipleship Council engaged the Forum in a discussion on their plans to issue material which would give people confidence in sharing their faith with others. Subjects could include interfaith issues; suffering; sexuality; and science and creation. The Forum stands ready to comment on the draft documents once the Group has prepared the text. The Forum also discussed a paper on the theology of safeguarding, prepared by the Safeguarding Committee for inclusion in its General Assembly Report. As an adjunct to the report of the Joint Study Group of the Church of Scotland and the Church of England, "Growth in Communion, Partnership in Mission", reported on by the

Ecumenical Relations Committee, the Forum has been asked to reflect on the nature of our respective responsibilities as national churches and this work is in hand.

2.2 The Forum also devoted some time to discussing a report entitled *Christian Doctrine and the Impact Agenda*. This was prepared by a number of academics in Scotland and England including Professors Paul Nimmo and Tom Greggs of the University of Aberdeen. The report considers the requirements in the Government's Research Excellence Framework for academics to demonstrate that research has positive consequences for society. The report makes clear the value to churches and wider society of the work done by academic theologians. A study of such a kind which integrates academic thinking with the life of the church can only help us.

2.3 Alongside other discussions, the Forum continues to work on producing a substantial reflection on the theology of same-sex marriage. Such a reflection is not being produced in the abstract. For more than twenty-five years, our Church has engaged in a debate on human sexuality which threatens to polarise us into two camps, much to the harm of our fundamental calling to engage in mission and offer comfort and support to the vulnerable. The Church of Scotland is not alone in suffering from a generation-long and polarising debate, but, almost uniquely among churches engaged in this argument, has framed the matter differently. Over the years we have come to see that it is unrealistic for either side to think that it can gain 'absolute victory'. Over the last two years, largely as a result of the innovation in the General Assembly of 2013 in 'flipping' the proposal so that the default position of the Church remained the traditional perspective, the Forum has tried to elaborate a middle area of what has been called 'constrained difference'.

2.4 The notion of 'constrained difference' has not been pulled out of thin air. 'Constrained difference' has in fact been the flexible strength of the Church of Scotland through many historic disagreements and it is the embodied avoidance of polemic. 'Constrained difference' is different from relativism, which always runs the risk of stepping onto a slippery slope and losing the ability to stop. 'Constrained difference' understands that the current debate is not one between those who love Scripture and those who deny it. It recognises that each of the two most vocal perspectives rely on Scripture but use it differently. It is a fundamental part of our faith in the Reformed Tradition that we permit each other in good conscience to interpret Scripture differently but to keep any such interpretations in check by what we understand as the substance of the faith.

2.5 The Forum believes that such a way of working is not alien to our tradition and offers the Church of Scotland its best chance of moving through the crisis and recriminations of these days. Other churches are beginning to adopt our methodology of 'constrained difference' and the Forum's reflection on same sex marriage will take that pattern of thinking further. We intend to report in detail to the General Assembly of 2017.

3. Future Work

The Forum would be pleased to assist the General Assembly and its Councils and Committees in any matter of theology and doctrine. While the main focus of our work in 2016/17 will inevitably be the formulation of a report on same-sex marriage, we will have the capacity to consider other issues and would welcome being consulted at an early stage, particularly on significant pieces of theological work.

4. Thanks

The Forum is grateful to all those who have sought its views and listened so graciously to its comments. It is grateful too to those members who are due to retire from membership at the General Assembly: Rev Professor David Fergusson, Rev Dr Doug Gay and Rev Dr Frances Henderson, the Vice-Convener. All have been stalwart members of the Forum, bringing wisdom and insight to its discussions, and their contributions have been greatly valued.

In the name of the Theological Forum

IAIN TORRANCE, *Convener*
FRANCES HENDERSON, *Vice-Convener*
PAULINE WEIBYE, *Acting Secretary*

ADDENDUM

Rev Dr Frances Henderson retires from her three-year term as the first Vice-Convener of the Theological Forum at this Assembly. The Forum owes her a huge debt of gratitude. She has been a loyal and hard-working Vice-Convener, always available for consultation and readily contributing her views and expertise – and, as a former member of the faculty at New College, there was much of that in evidence! Frances is also a busy parish minister in a united charge in rural Annandale, playing her full part in the affairs of Presbytery. The Forum does not underestimate the time commitment that such a demanding workload entails and expresses its sincere thanks and its best wishes for her continued ministry.

In the name of the Theological Forum

IAIN TORRANCE, *Convener*
PAULINE WEIBYE, *Acting Secretary*