

1 **Church of Scotland Theological Forum**
2 **Five Marks of Mission**
3 **Finalised Report – Thursday 20 August 2020**

4
5 *Introduction*

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7 In the Assembly Trustees' update to the Church in May 2020, they made it clear
8 that in this time of crisis in resources of money and people, the Assembly Trustees,
9 in consultation with the Faith Nurture and Faith Impact Forums, will stop or scale
10 back work which could be done by other charities or agencies, or which is of no
11 clear benefit to the local church or those in the ministries of the Church. To help
12 with this practical task of prioritisation, the Assembly Trustees indicated that they
13 would draw for guidance on the Five Marks of Mission.

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15 The Marks are as follows:

- 16 1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- 17 2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- 18 3. To respond to human need by loving service
- 19 4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every
20 kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- 21 5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the
22 life of the earth

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24 The Assembly Trustees indicated that for work in the two Forums to continue to
25 be funded, it would need to fall under one or more of the first three marks. If
26 work were to fall under marks 4 or 5, it would need also to fall under 1-3, in “a
27 fusion of proclamation and practice”. In other words, all the work of the two
28 Forums should lead “to the spiritual or numerical growth of the Church.”

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30 This approach gave rise to wide debate in the Church, including a response during
31 the Assembly Trustees' webinar from Revd Dr Doug Gay, asking for the
32 Theological Forum to reflect on the Five Marks of Mission for the Church of
33 Scotland today. The Assembly Trustees subsequently invited the Theological
34 Forum to write a brief report, which we now offer.

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37 *The Five Marks of Mission: A Brief History*

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39 This particular definition of Christian mission emerged from the Anglican
40 Communion in the 1980s, building on intra-evangelical debates from the 1970s
41 regarding the relative priorities of personal evangelism and social engagement.
42 Initially, in 1984, it was a four-fold definition of mission; an ecological fifth aspect
43 was added in 1990. In 2012 a focus on violence, peace and reconciliation was
44 added to the fourth aspect. There have been different introductory words.

45 Initially they were: *The mission of the Church is therefore*. But today, the introduction
46 on the Anglican Communion website has become: *The mission of the Church is the*
47 *mission of Christ*.

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49 It is in the past decade or so that this definition of mission has gained widespread
50 acceptance and use both within the Anglican Communion and ecumenically. The
51 Five Marks are central to the current process of strategic planning in the Church of
52 England. Within the Church of Scotland, Doug Gay in *Reforming the Kirk* (2017)
53 spoke warmly of the Five Marks: “This is the kind of full-spectrum lens which I
54 believe we need to refocus the life and work of the Church of Scotland. It calls
55 evangelicals beyond individualism to social and ecological ethics. It reminds
56 liberals of the importance of evangelism and discipleship... This is the key insight
57 which I think can be the star which guides us on the next stage of the Kirk’s
58 journey.... Missiology frames ecclesiology which frames ministry.” (189) And
59 Ecumenical Relations in their report to the General Assembly of 2018 reflected
60 briefly on the Five Marks in the context of the widespread ecumenical turn to
61 seeing mission as the Mission of God (*missio Dei*).

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64 *Theological reflections on the Five Marks of Mission*

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66 In order to assess the current discussion over the use of the Five Marks in the
67 Church, we need to recognise an ambiguity over their purpose. They have lacked a
68 consistent frame: is this God’s mission? Christ’s? The church’s? And when they
69 are used as some form of yardstick for assessing priorities in a particular context,
70 how does the church’s mission relate to that of God or Christ? This lack of a
71 consistent frame may contribute to a certain ambiguity as to their status and use in
72 particular contexts. Are the Marks broadly to be understood as a theological
73 understanding of God’s mission in the world in which the church participates, or
74 as a practical checklist for churches’ missional work in specific contexts, or some
75 balanced combination of these and other interpretations?

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77 The Forum’s view is that the Five Marks function helpfully as a theological vision
78 statement for Christian mission. They include essential aspects of the missional
79 work of the church: evangelism, discipleship, pastoral care, social justice,
80 reconciliation and care for creation. This combination echoes the teaching of
81 Jesus, the practice of the early church, the message of the biblical prophets,
82 insights from the experiences of poor and oppressed people, and openness to
83 science and ecological awareness. Their language and emphases are agreeable to
84 our Reformed understanding.

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86 There are other aspects of mission which arguably could also find a place, such as
87 worship, prayer, holy communion, nurturing the discipleship of all believers; sacred
88 spaces; mention of other faiths, cultures, traditions and philosophies of life; and

89 acknowledgment of the differences between cultures in which mission takes place.
90 It may be that these other aspects would belong more naturally in a detailed, local,
91 contextual plan for mission. The Five Marks are not that kind of plan – national,
92 regional or local – for a particular place and time, or particular church tradition.
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94 While the focus of our conversation has been on the Five Marks, we note in
95 passing that there could be quite different ways of conceptualising mission, for
96 example according to the traditional threefold office of Jesus Christ as prophet,
97 priest and king, which has received significant emphasis in Reformed theology.
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99 There are also internal questions raised by the Five Marks. As a vision statement
100 for mission, is there a hierarchy within the Five Marks? Is one or more
101 foundational? Are some more important than others? At least two could be seen
102 as foundational. Arguably the first mark, proclaiming the Good News of the
103 Kingdom, could be seen as incorporating all of the succeeding elements,
104 particularly if proclamation is understood not only as speaking and writing, but in
105 loving and acting. Alternatively the third mark, responding to human need by
106 loving service, could be seen as incorporating proclamation of the Gospel,
107 nurturing and baptising, social and ecological engagement.
108

109 But more important than any hierarchy is the Forum's conviction that all these five
110 aspects belong within any vision statement of Christian mission. They hang
111 together. Proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom necessarily involves
112 transformation in the lives of individuals and societies; loving service does not stop
113 with care for individuals but aims to reach their community and environment;
114 Good News is not only for the salvation of individual people, but for their lived
115 experience within families, communities, conflicts and creation. In being invited to
116 share God's mission for the world, we are called to contribute across that whole
117 mission so far as we are able.
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119
120 *So far as we are able*
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122 Our current context in the Church of Scotland, both before the pandemic and
123 exacerbated by it, is one of reduced resources – fewer people and less money.
124 Prioritisation in how to offer and place our resources in our lives and work of
125 mission has always been essential, but has come into even sharper focus through
126 the pandemic. The Assembly Trustees have a particular responsibility for this
127 prioritisation, and have set out an approach to the Five Marks of Mission as a way
128 to guide the Church in setting priorities.
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130 On learning of such priorities for the two central Forums of the Church, some
131 people clearly felt that aspects of mission which they believed to be essential to the
132 Gospel were being devalued. What may have exacerbated this impression was the

133 apparent use of the Five Marks of Mission as a list of priorities from which the
134 Church could choose some as more important than others at this particular time.
135 The difficulty which was quickly realised by many in the Church with that
136 approach was that the Five Marks as a vision statement of mission are akin to a
137 definition of mission. And so any attempt to prioritise some marks over others
138 may give the impression that our Christian mission is being redefined.

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140 It is clear from the strength of recent debate that the Five Marks of Mission are
141 not the sort of text which can straightforwardly guide prioritisation in the current
142 context. It is our view that the Five Marks are not separable into parts with some
143 having more theological importance than others. And so while the Five Marks
144 may helpfully point to areas of work which are broadly missional, they are not
145 particularly suitable for informing specific decisions about resource-allocation for
146 work which falls within the Marks. They are too general, applying across
147 denominations, geography and history. And they are definitional rather than a plan
148 for a particular place and time. It may be that the terminology of “Marks” may
149 contribute to misunderstanding. If called, for example, “Five Aspects of Mission”,
150 that could suggest a more holistic understanding of our missional life.

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152 Of course, there is no theological reason why every aspect of the work of the two
153 central Forums of the General Assembly should be required to fulfil all Five Marks
154 of Mission. (Nor perhaps is every Christian or congregation required to fulfil every
155 mark.) For one thing the Church of Scotland exists in ecumenical settings within
156 and beyond Scotland, and different aspects of mission may be exercised more fully
157 by different denominations or parts of the church. Furthermore, the Church of
158 Scotland witnesses to Christ not only through the work of central agencies, but in
159 the work of presbyteries, parish churches, ministries and – above all – its members.
160 It may well be that in a time of depleted resources, the task of prioritisation in
161 mission is not which Marks of Mission matter more, but which individuals and
162 organisations within the Church (and across the church ecumenically) are better
163 placed within specific contexts to witness in particular ways. Such pragmatic
164 decision-making – requiring a practical wisdom – is essential to planning how we
165 as a church will continue in mission, guided of course by scripture, Reformed
166 tradition and particular visions such as the Five Marks of Mission.

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169 *A related concern*

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171 At almost the same time as we received the request from the Assembly Trustees to
172 consider the place of the Five Marks of Mission in the Church, we were asked by a
173 minister if we would consider theological issues around places of worship. The
174 family resemblance between these issues comes in the context of prioritisation in a
175 time of diminishing resources. Many church buildings are being used less and less
176 for worship, or being closed and sold; the growth in online worship since March

177 2020 has also raised questions around where we worship. The Forum was asked if
178 we would consider the importance of architecture, beauty and other aesthetic
179 questions in relation to the prioritisation of spaces for worship and for mission.
180 This is clearly a significant and sensitive set of questions, and this relatively brief
181 report is not the place for an extended reflection. We raise it here to indicate how
182 wide-ranging theological questions can be in reflecting on practical decision-
183 making in a time of shrinking resources. Moreover a vision statement such as the
184 Five Marks of Mission would need to be supplemented by other considerations
185 when reflecting on issues around sacred spaces.

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188 *Conclusion*

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190 The Theological Forum has welcomed this invitation not least because it has cast
191 light on mission. It may be tempting in a deeply troubled time for the Church to
192 focus on the Church as it is, and how we offer worship, sacraments and pastoral
193 care within the Church during the pandemic and associated restrictions on public
194 life. (And indeed the Forum has offered reflections on online sacraments, available
195 on the Church's website.) But the Forum is convinced of the central importance
196 of mission at this time no less than at any other. And we are strongly persuaded
197 that concern for social justice, reconciliation and the environment are essential
198 parts of that mission, alongside evangelism, discipleship and pastoral care, not only
199 because we see them as part of God's mission to the world, but also because we
200 cannot with integrity proclaim the Good News of the kingdom, or teach, baptise
201 and nurture new believers while offering too narrow a hope for that kingdom. The
202 pandemic has shown that society in Scotland and beyond continues to be deeply
203 concerned for social justice and environmental responsibility, and the Church faces
204 the significant danger of losing further credibility if it is not also deeply concerned
205 with these matters as part of its mission.

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207 In conclusion, we affirm the Five Marks of Mission as a helpful vision statement
208 for Christian mission, and a useful definition of mission to guide the Church of
209 Scotland today. The Five Marks hang together: each conveys something essential
210 to God's mission in the world as we discern it. In every context, including the
211 current circumstances of constrained resources in the Church of Scotland, it is
212 necessary to direct resources at different levels of the Church into different aspects
213 of work. The Five Marks may be helpful in offering a broad, generous theological
214 vision to frame pragmatic decisions over priorities, but the Five Marks themselves
215 do not do the work of prioritisation. That requires a practical wisdom, with an
216 awareness of specific local, regional and national contexts. Such decision-making
217 will also recognise the missional and work of members, ministers, churches
218 and presbyteries alongside central Forums, and the possibility of sharing
219 responsibility for aspects of mission through ecumenical partnerships.

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221 **Revd Dr Donald MacEwan**
222 **Convener, Theological Forum**