

COMMITTEE ON OVERTURES AND CASES MAY 2025

Proposed Deliverance

The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.
2. Note that following approval at the General Assembly of 2023, the requisite proportion (two thirds) of the Presbyteries of the Church have approved the text of the proposed amendments to Articles II and V of the Articles Declaratory in Matters Spiritual (1921) enacted by the General Assembly of 1926 and to the Preamble, Questions and Formula authorised by the General Assembly of 1929, all of which are contained in the Confessions of Faith Overture sent down for the consideration of Presbyteries by the General Assembly of 2024, this being in a second successive year.
3. Convert into a Standing Law of the Church under the provisions of Article VIII of the Articles Declaratory in Matters Spiritual (1921), the Confessions of Faith Overture in the form set forth in Appendix B, with effect from 1 January 2026.
4. Instruct the Clerks to amend, as necessary, the Acts of the General Assembly in accordance with the terms of the Overture.

Report

1. BACKGROUND: THE PROCESS OF CONFESSIONAL REFORM

1.1 As we come to the culmination of a process that has lasted seven years, the Theological Forum provides the below summary of the Church's journey of confessional reform.

1.2 This process began back in 2018, following a successful Overture to the General Assembly that instructed the Theological 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.

1.3 Work carried out to date in fulfilment of this instruction has included an academic conference^[i]; an interim report in 2021^[ii]; a webinar; a consultation with Presbyteries, Kirk Sessions and individuals; the production of video resources^[iii] and a final report brought to the General Assembly of 2022.^[iv]

1.4 In 2021, the Theological Forum presented its interim report, 'Westminster, Confessions and the Church.'^[v] The report reviewed the current confessional position of the Church and explored possibilities for change, laying out a range of options which the Church could take. The report offered the Theological Forum's 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 liberty of opinion on such points of doctrine as do not enter into the fundamentals of the faith. The report invited responses to the Forum by the end of 2021 to assist them in offering up firm proposals to the General Assembly of 2022.

1.5 Drawing on the feedback received from Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions, the Theological Forum brought firm proposals regarding the confessional standards of the Church to the General Assembly of 2022. The report titled 'The Confessional Position of the Church of Scotland: Proposals for Reform'^[vi] found that while the Westminster Confession of Faith had played an important part in the history of the Church of Scotland, in practice it has a limited role in the life of the Church today, and the majority of office holders have not been able to fully commit to the Confession for some time. Because of this, the relation of Church office holders to the Confession has been carefully limited by the vows required by the Church since 1929, by which office holders declare their belief in the basic Christian doctrines contained in the Confession but not the entire Confession itself. This has, however, created the current situation in which the Church of Scotland has a subordinate standard that many of its office holders reject, and vows which they do not always understand. The report concluded that this was an unsatisfactory situation that required correction.

1.6 The proposals put forward as a solution were as follows:

- To give ministers and other recognised ministries greater knowledge and confidence in their faith through teaching on the confessional position of the Church and the vows and subscription of office holders.
- To create a Book of Confessions that would contain the Westminster Confession of Faith and other statements of faith that express the range and depth of Reformed thought.
- To clarify the location of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith that we hold in common.
- To amend the vows and subscription that office holders make in light of these changes.

1.7 The 2022 General Assembly received the Forum's report and approved its proposals. In fulfilment of the first part of the deliverance, the Faith Nurture Forum and the Theological Forum introduced a Church of Scotland Learning module on the confessional position of the Church and the vows of office holders for those entering into recognised ministries and elderships. As further instructed, the Theological Forum with the Legal Questions Committee then prepared an Overture^[vii] that would effect the proposed creation of a Book of Confessions and corresponding changes to the vows and subscription of office holders. The Overture was brought to the 2023 General Assembly and was approved and transmitted to the Presbyteries of the Church for returns by 31 December 2023, seeking a decision on approval or disapproval and also proposed amendments.

1.8 The Overture was subject to Article VIII procedure, which requires two subsequent General Assemblies to pass the Overture, and for two thirds of Presbyteries to pass it in two successive years. In 2024, it received sufficient support from Presbyteries (19 out of 22-more than two thirds-approved with or without suggested amendment), along with some comments and questions, and so the Overture came back to the General Assembly of 2024^[viii]. At the General Assembly of 2024, it was agreed that certain amendments be made to the Overture and the Assembly decided to send it in amended final form to Presbyteries for approval or disapproval, with returns by 31 December 2024.

2. CURRENT DECISION REQUIRED

2.1 As will be seen from the returns detailed in Appendix A, the Confessions of Faith Overture has again received sufficient support from Presbyteries (in this case, 12 out of 14 Presbyteries - more than two thirds approving) to once more be presented to the General Assembly. This General Assembly may now decide whether or not to approve the Confessions of Faith Overture in its final form, as set out in Appendix B, i.e. whether to convert it into a Standing Law of the Church.

3. NEXT STEPS IF THE OVERTURE IS APPROVED

3.1 If this General Assembly approves the Confessions of Faith Overture, the next steps would be as follows:

- The text of the Book of Confessions, along with the text of the updated vows and subscription of office holders, would be made available on the Church's website and would be published in hard copy by 1 January 2026.
- The Ordinal and Service Book would be updated to reflect the proposed changes to the vows and subscription of office holders.
- The companion volume to the Book of Confessions, which the Theological Forum was asked to produce at the 2024 General Assembly (containing the additional documents mentioned in the Second Article Declaratory, namely: "The Directory for the Public Worship of God," "The Form of Presbyterian Church Government " and "The Form of Process" and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms), would follow on from the production of the Book of Confessions.

3.2 Amendments to the Articles Declaratory and to the Preamble, Questions and Formula would take effect from 1 January 2026.

4. SUMMARY OF COMMENTS RECEIVED FROM PRESBYTERIES AND RESPONSE THEREON FROM THE THEOLOGICAL FORUM

4.1 The Committee is grateful for the comments received from four out of the twelve Presbyteries that submitted returns to the Confessions of Faith Overture and has asked the Theological Forum to comment. The comments coalesced around the following themes:

- The relationship between creeds and Scripture.
- The new vow in section 2.2 of the Overture.
- The translation of different sections of the Book of Confessions into other languages.
- The choice of texts included in the Book of Confessions.
- The process for amending the Book of Confessions.

4.2 The Forum offers the following points in response:

- The documents contained within the Book of Confessions, including the Creeds, would always be subject to Scripture. As the second vow asks, 'Do you believe in 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 Book of Confessions would reflect and affirm both Catholic and Reformed distinctives. In promising to be 'guided' by the Book of Confessions, office holders would vow that their beliefs, teaching and life would be informed and shaped by the Book.
- The Forum agrees that it would be important for the Book of Confessions to be made available in Gaelic. Work has started to produce a Gaelic resource that will contain confessional material.
- Any amendment to the content of the Book of Confessions would require Article VIII procedure, meaning that it would have to pass three consecutive General Assemblies, and obtain the support of two-thirds of Presbyteries in the two intervening years.

5. THE BOOK OF CONFESSIONS

5.1 Should the Confessions of Faith Overture be approved by this year's General Assembly, changes to Articles Declaratory II and V, and the Preamble would mean that the Westminster Confession of Faith would retain its status as a subordinate standard of the Church, and that it would be joined by other historic and contemporary statements of faith. The subordinate standards of the Church of Scotland would therefore be contained in its Book of Confessions, and the Book of Confessions would contain the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, The Scots Confession, The Westminster Confession of Faith and the 1992 Statement of Faith. The fact that the Book of Confessions would contain a number of documents is a recognition that there are multiple Reformed identities present within our Church. This is not a weakness, but would allow for a range of Reformed perspectives to be heard and considered.

5.2 The Book of Confessions would also contain an Introduction and Prefaces, drafted by the Theological Forum, which would explain how the statements of faith came to be written, what is distinctive about them and what role they have played in the life of the Church. The Book could act as an aid for office holders as they teach and disciple in 21st century Scotland. Ministers and other recognised ministries would have a single point of reference for seeking to understand and explain the teaching of the Church to members and enquirers, and would have rich theological resources from across the history of our Church to bring into conversation with contemporary issues.

5.3 A Church of Scotland Learning Module on the Book of Confessions and corresponding changes to vows would also be made available on the Church of Scotland Learning platform. This training would not only be academic, but would foster the ability to apply the faith expressed in the Book of Confessions practically to our own lives of faith and to the communities we live in. Being guided by the Book of Confessions would be an embodied and lived experience, with concrete application in the world we live in. The different expressions of faith in the Book of Confessions would describe the Good News of the love and action of God. They would speak of the God who became incarnate in Christ, and who is intimately concerned with our everyday realities. If we understand what they are saying, believe in them and live them out, they could make a real difference in compelling us to bless our own communities with love and acts of service for others. This not only has implications for everyday relationships, but is the basis for mission.

5.4 The Committee extends its thanks to the following members of the Theological Forum: its Convener, Rev Dr Liam Fraser, for leading work on the Book of Confessions, and key contributors including members Rev Dr John Carswell, Rev Dr Alasdair J Macleod, Rev Dr Lynn McChlery, Prof Paul Nimmo, Ms Jennifer Stark and Prof Andrew Torrance.

In the name and by the authority of the Committee

FIONA SMITH, Convener

Appendix A

RETURNS TO THE CONFESSIONS OF FAITH OVERTURE

| | Approve | Disapprove |
|-----------------------------------|---------|------------|
| Number of Presbyteries* | 12 | 0 |
| Total number of Presbyters | 1,021 | 89 |

**In the year to 31 December 2024, there existed 14 Presbyteries in the Church. Two Presbyteries did not submit a return: (i) the Presbytery of Lewis, which met and chose neither to approve or disapprove the Overture, and (ii) the Presbytery of Jerusalem, which took no decision.*

Appendix B

Text which was sent to Presbyteries for returns by 31 December 2024

*Cumulatively, all proposed changes are shown in **bold italicised** font.*

THE CONFESSIONS OF FAITH OVERTURE

The General Assembly again adopt the Overture the tenor whereof follows, and transmit the same a second time to Presbyteries for their consideration under the provisions of Article VIII of the Articles Declaratory in Matters Spiritual (1921), directing that returns be sent to the Principal Clerk not later than 31 December 2024.

The General Assembly, with consent of not less than two-thirds of the whole of the Presbyteries of the Church obtained in two immediately successive years, enact, ordain and declare that Articles II and V of the Articles Declaratory in Matters Spiritual (1921) enacted by the General Assembly of 1926 and the Preamble, Questions and Formula authorised by the General Assembly of 1929 shall be amended as follows:

1. Articles Declaratory

1.1 *Change Article II from:*

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, 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.

To:

II. The subordinate standards of the Church of Scotland are contained in its Book of Confessions. The Book of Confessions contains the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, The Scots Confession, The Westminster Confession of Faith and the 1992 Statement of Faith. Its government is Presbyterian, and is exercised through Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, 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.

1.2 Also change Article V from:

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 officebearers 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.

To:

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 **Book of Confessions**, to modify the forms of expression therein, or to formulate other doctrinal statements, and to define the relation thereto of its officebearers and members, but always in agreement with the Word of God and the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith contained in the said **Book of Confessions**, 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.

2. Ordination and Induction Vows

2.1 Change the vow:

Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church?

To

Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith **expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds**?

2.2 Also create a new vow after the aforementioned one:

Do you confess the Catholic and Reformed Faith of the Church as contained in its Book of Confessions, and promise to be guided by the said Book in your life and doctrine?

3. Formula of Subscription

3.1 Change the first paragraph of the Formula from:

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

To

I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith **expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. I promise to be guided in my life and doctrine by the Book of Confessions of this Church.**

4. Preamble

4.1 Change the last paragraph of the Preamble from:

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.

To:

The subordinate standards of the Church of Scotland are contained in its Book of Confessions. The Book of Confessions contains the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, The Scots Confession, The Westminster Confession of Faith and the 1992 Statement of Faith. The Church recognises liberty of opinion on such points of doctrine as do not enter into the **fundamental doctrines** of the Faith, 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 **expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds** – of which agreement the Church itself shall be sole judge.

References

- [i] <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/TIS/issue/view/188>
- [ii] [Theological Forum report](#)
- [iii] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Cmq_tG_mWw&t=10s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_YkZfCWLuU&t=468s
- [iv] https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/93374/theological-forum.pdf
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