

## THEOLOGICAL FORUM MAY 2025

**Proposed Deliverance****The General Assembly:**

1. Receive the Report.

**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 to:

- (a) 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) express the theological vision of the Church in its worship, fellowship, witness and mission in and beyond contemporary Scotland;
- (c) 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) draw to the attention of the General Assembly theological matters which the Theological Forum considers to be of pressing contemporary relevance;
- (e) 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 and over the last year has concentrated on those issues assigned to it by the General Assembly of 2024. Its work has been carried out through substantial reading, discussion, reflection and prayer in its meetings, and through consultation with the other Committees and Programme Groups of the Church. The Forum has also advised upon a spectrum of issues that have arisen out of enquiries received from the wider Church. The following report is offered as an update on work carried out throughout 2024. The Confessions of Faith Overture, summary of returns from Presbyteries and information on the process of confessional reform and the creation of the Book of Confessions can be found in the Report of the Committee on Overtures and Cases.

**2. CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COUNCIL OF NICAEEA**

**2.1** This year marks the 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea. The Ecumenical Relations Committee and the Theological Forum were instructed by the 2024 General Assembly to reflect on the contemporary significance of the Council of Nicaea and to report to the General Assembly of 2025. The Forum offers the below in response to this instruction, and further information on the anniversary of the Council can be found in the Report of the Ecumenical Relations Committee.

**2.2** The First Council of Nicaea was called in 325. Among other things, it sought to respond to the teaching of Arius, who held that Jesus Christ was not truly God but instead an exalted creature. The Council ruled that this belief was contrary to the Christian faith, and in response, formulated the Nicene Creed, which declared that the Son was 'of the same substance' (*homoousion*) as the Father. At the First Council of Constantinople in 381 the Nicene Creed was amended further to safeguard the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, who is worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son. As such, the Nicene Creed confesses the divinity of Jesus and the divinity of the Holy Spirit along with that of the Father.

**2.3** Because the Nicene Creed is accepted by the overwhelming majority of Christians, its 1700th anniversary is being marked by a series of events throughout the world. One of these was the conference 'Towards Nicaea 2025: Exploring the Council's Ecumenical Significance Today' held from 4-8<sup>th</sup> November 2024 at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches at Bossey, Switzerland. At this conference, the Convener of the Theological Forum, the Rev Dr Liam Jerrold Fraser, presented a paper on the place of the Nicene Creed in the contemporary life of the Scottish Church.

**2.4** After tracing the history of Scotland's engagement with the Nicene Creed, the paper notes the resurgence of references to the Creed in recent ecumenical dialogue in Scotland, particularly the Saint Margaret Declaration<sup>[1]</sup> between the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Catholic Church. It then discusses the results of a survey of just under one hundred Scottish Church leaders on the Nicene Creed and its potential for Christian unity. The research found that over 73% of respondents believed the Creed was somewhat important to very important for Christian unity, while just over 25% of respondents believed it was not very important or not important at all. Further, over 77% of respondents believed that the Creed *could* become more important for Christian unity if its profile was raised. As such, the research demonstrates a high level of support for the Nicene Creed within the Scottish Church, and a belief that it could encourage greater Christian unity.

**2.5** This year, in the Report of the Committee on Overtures and Cases, the Theological Forum is asking the General Assembly to recognise the Nicene Creed as one of the subordinate standards of our Church. Should the Confessions of Faith Overture be approved by the General Assembly, the changes to the Ordination and Induction vows, Formula of Subscription and Preamble would identify the location of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith in both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. This new emphasis upon the Creeds would help to strengthen the unity of the Church of Scotland. Shared statements of faith that emerged from ecumenical councils have a universal intention and remind us that we have more in common than what separates us, and that though we may disagree over secondary issues, we are a single Church with a common faith.

**2.6** Emphasising our shared belief in Christ would also help our partnerships with other churches. The Creeds are recognised by almost every other Christian denomination in Scotland, whether this be the Scottish Episcopal Church, the United Reformed Church, the Roman Catholic Church or the Free Church, amongst many others. The increased visibility of the Creeds in the vows and subscription of office holders would make it clearer that the Church of Scotland is part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and that while we are members of different denominations, all Christians are united in the one, single, and indivisible Body of Jesus Christ. If the General Assembly were to approve this year's Confessions of Faith Overture, it would mark an important chapter in the history of our Church, and in the life of the Nicene Creed in its 1700th year.

### **3. ASSISTED DYING**

**3.1** At the General Assembly of 2023 the Theological Forum and the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team (FAPLT) received the following instruction:

**3.2** *Noting that the historical decisions of the General Assembly have been to support current civil law as to assisted dying, but now recognising that there exists a range of theological views and ethical opinions on assisted dying within the Church, instruct the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team, the Theological Forum and other relevant parties to explore such views and opinions and report to a future General Assembly.*

**3.3** An Assisted Dying Working Group was created and the Theological Forum was represented by Convener Rev Dr Liam Fraser, Secretary Ms Nathalie Mares MacCallum and members Rev Canon Prof Paul Middleton and Rev Dr Alasdair J Macleod. From 2023 to 2025, they attended meetings, contributed to discussion, undertook substantial reading, participated in consultations with medical professionals, researchers, hospice chaplains, palliative care practitioners and politicians, and assisted with facilitating conversations on assisted dying with every Presbytery. They listened carefully to a range of views and made significant written contributions to the final report, 'Assisted Dying: A Spectrum of Belief'.

**3.4** The Theological Forum wishes to thank these members and the wider membership of the Working Group for this important contribution to the Church's understanding of and engagement with the issue of assisted dying.

### **4. APOLOGY FOR THE CHURCH'S INVOLVEMENT WITH AND CONNECTION TO HISTORIC CHATTEL SLAVERY**

**4.1** The 2023 General Assembly instructed FAPLT, in partnership with the Theological Forum and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group, to 'prepare a statement of acknowledgement and apology for the Church's involvement with and connection to historic chattel slavery, to be considered for adoption at a future General Assembly.'

**4.2** The Theological Forum has been represented on the Racial Justice Working Group by member Professor Glen Pettigrove, Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, who brings specialist knowledge and expertise in the research areas of virtue ethics and moral psychology and their application to forgiveness, reconciliation and apology. The Forum is grateful for Prof Pettigrove's contribution to this work to date.

**4.3** A short life Working Group is in the process of being set up, with representatives from FAPLT, the Theological Forum and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group, with a view to reporting to the General Assembly of 2026. An interim update on this work can be found in the Public Life and Social Justice section of FAPLT's report to the General Assembly of 2025.

### **5. DECLINE OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND**

**5.1** The Theological Forum jointly with FAPLT was instructed by the General Assembly of 2023 'to reflect on the decline of the Church of Scotland in regard to membership and ministry candidates and to offer guidance on what steps should be taken to address it, reporting by 2024 failing which by 2025.' Much work has been done on assessing and agreeing the main factors which have contributed to the decline of Church of Scotland membership and ministry candidates. A full paper will be available in 2026. In the meantime, a number of initiatives are active to develop pathways to ministry and to invest in church revitalisation and mission.

### **6. FUTURE WORK**

**6.1** The Theological Forum will continue to work with FAPLT on the decline of the Church of Scotland and what can be done to address it. Further work on the legacies of slavery is anticipated with FAPLT and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group. Possible future work on confessional reform, subject to approval by the General Assembly, is outlined in the Report of the Committee on Overtures and Cases. The Forum stands ready to assist the General Assembly and its Councils, Committees and Programme Groups in any matter of theology and doctrine and would welcome consultation at an early stage in any significant pieces of work.

### **7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**7.1** The Forum is grateful for the hard work, commitment and contribution of each of its members over the last year, and is grateful to all those who have sought its views and listened so graciously to its comments.

*In the name of the Theological Forum*

LIAM JERROLD FRASER, *Convener*  
PAUL T. NIMMO, *Vice-Convener*  
NATHALIE MARES MACCALLUM, *Secretary*

**ADDENDUM****Rev Dr Liam Fraser**

Rev Dr Liam Fraser completes his term as Convener of the Theological Forum at this year's General Assembly. Liam has served on the Forum for several years, and prior to becoming Convener served as Vice-Convener. During his Convenorship he has steered the Forum successfully through several important pieces of work, including the live proposal to create a Book of Confessions for the Church of Scotland, and the publication of reports on ecotheology, on the calling of the church, and on transgender identities. To this array of complex and demanding work he has brought knowledge, wisdom, and insight, encouraging constructive debate and promoting wide consensus within the Forum, as well as leavening its affairs with good humour. Above all, he has invested a tremendous amount of time in the steadily increasing business of the Forum, demonstrating his commitment not only to the life and mission of the church but also to the health of its theological foundations. He has also continued to serve the parish of St. Michael's Parish Church, Linlithgow and to lead it into its recent union. In expressing our sincere gratitude to Liam for his labours, we pray God's blessing upon him in his ongoing and future ministry, and wish him well in all that lies ahead.

PAUL T. NIMMO, *Vice-Convener*  
NATHALIE MARES MACCALLUM, *Secretary*

**References**

- [i] <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/archive/2022/kirks-general-assembly-endorses-saint-margaret-declaration>