

Paper 12

Environmental Policy

Mission Committee

Basic information

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Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	General Assembly: <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Resolves that urgent action should be taken to reduce carbon emissions across the whole of church life, with the aim of reaching net zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2030.b) Adopts the Environmental Policy in Part 2 of this paper, and <i>instructs</i> the committees and bodies under its control, and <i>encourages</i> associated bodies (including Trusts, the Retired Ministers Housing Society, and Resource Centres for Learning), Synods and local churches to adopt as a minimum the practices it sets out.c) Instructs each Assembly committee to develop a Net Zero Action Plan for its area of responsibility, and set and monitor targets for implementing this policy, reporting by March 2023, and annually thereafter.d) Establishes a Net Zero Task Group with membership of one Synod Moderator, one member of the Finance Committee, one representative of the URC Trust, the Secretary for Church and Society, the Deputy General Secretary (Admin and Resources), a representative of URC Youth, a Synod Property Officer, and a Synod Green Apostle. The group's remit shall be to:

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. oversee progress in implementing this policy and report regularly to the Assembly Executive and General Assembly 2. identify, advocate for, and where possible put in place any additional resources, support and expertise that are needed to implement this policy across the Church 3. engage with Assembly committees around their Net Zero Action Plans and support them to develop them further 4. encourage and facilitate the sharing of experiences across the Church, including celebrating achievements.
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Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	The Environmental Policy seeks to enable the Church to respond in faith to the urgency of the climate emergency by setting out an ambition for the URC to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2030, and putting in place plans to achieve this.
Main points	Caring for Creation, a just and sustainable use of the world's resources, and a concern for the environment are fundamental Gospel commitments. This paper reviews developments and progress since the URC's current Environmental Policy was adopted in 2016, and proposes an updated Environmental Policy, with more ambitious targets for carbon reduction, that is embedded more fully in the life, priorities and structures of the Church. It sets out actions to reduce carbon emissions across the whole of church life, including in relation to travel, meetings, buildings, and how investments and resources are used.
Previous relevant documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental Policy for the United Reformed Church (adopted by General Assembly in 2016, updated by Mission Council in May 2019) • Creating a climate of change: a new approach to ethical investment (Mission Council, May 2019) • Environmental Policy progress review (Mission Council, July 2020).
Consultation has taken place with...	Mission Committee, Synod Moderators, General Secretariat, Synod Green Apostles network, URC Youth Executive, Church House Connective group, Chief Finance Officer, Methodist Action for Hope Task Group.

Summary of impact

Financial	Adoption of some of the recommended practices, such as carbon offsetting for travel and energy use, will incur some additional expenses for central budgets, but others such as increased use of videoconferencing rather than physically meeting in person will save money. Work to make our buildings
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	more environmentally efficient can be costly, but these will be decisions for Synods and local churches to make in response to the policy, rather than a direct cost of the policy.
External (eg ecumenical)	Seeking to rapidly reduce the carbon footprint of the Church is a necessary response to the climate crisis. Adopting a 2030 target for reaching net zero emissions would align the URC with close partner denominations, including the Church of England, the Methodist Church, and the Church of Scotland.

The URC's current Environmental Policy was adopted by General Assembly in 2016, and slightly updated in 2019. This proposed updated version is presented by the Environmental Task Group established in 2016, following wide consultation over the last year.

This paper is in two parts. Part 1 sets out the background to the policy: its theological and Biblical basis; developments, learning and progress since the present policy was adopted in 2016; and the rationale for the proposals that follow. Part 2 is the proposed updated Environmental Policy.

Part one: background and rationale

1. Theological and biblical basis

- a) As a Church, we affirm that care for Creation, a just and sustainable use of the world's resources, and a concern for the environment are fundamental Gospel commitments.
- b) We believe that:
 - God created, and continues to create, the whole universe, sustains and nurtures Creation, and wills to redeem the whole of Creation (Romans 8:19-22).
 - the reconciliation of all things to God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus cannot be separated from God's act of creation: that all things have been created through Christ and for Christ – the Word of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth – and that, through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile to Godself all things by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:16-20).
 - creative and redemptive work also belongs to the work of the Spirit, who swept over the face of the waters in the beginning, and who inspires a groaning Creation as it awaits redemption.

We acknowledge God the Trinity to be the transcendent and immanent source, sustenance and salvation of all Creation.

- c) We acknowledge humanity's interdependence with the rest of Creation, and that the flourishing of humankind cannot be separated from the flourishing of all life. We believe that God calls human beings to live in relationship with the rest of Creation, and to be partners in God's ongoing creative, renewing and redeeming

activity; commands us to act justly and in righteousness not only towards our fellow human beings, but to all Creation; and requires us to care for Creation so that future generations, whom God also loves, can enjoy it and benefit from it.

- d) We know that human activity is responsible for the degradation of the earth, increasing climate change, and a frightening acceleration in the loss of biodiversity. This cannot be the will of God. It is harming the web of life and the balance of nature, and imposing most heavily upon the poorest people in the world. We believe that knowingly to continue in such activities is a sin for which highly industrialised nations must repent, seek forgiveness and make restitution.
- e) We acknowledge our complicity in the sinful structures that are causing wanton damage to Creation, perpetuating injustice, and delaying action to change direction.
- f) We affirm that it is part of Christian mission to strive to safeguard the integrity of Creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth. This involves acknowledging humankind's responsibility, sharing in putting right the relationships within God's Creation that have gone wrong, and working within the Church and with partners outside the Church to pursue justice and sustainability, as envisaged in the biblical vision of the world as it is meant to be. As the Glasgow Multi-Faith Declaration of 2021, to which the United Reformed Church is a signatory, affirms, 'We know that we must change our ways to ensure a quality of life which all can share, and we need to provide hope for people of all ages, everywhere, including future generations.'
- g) We commit to:
 - listen to and intercede for those threatened by climate change and environmental degradation
 - adopt sustainable lifestyles and practices that are consistent with our concern for Creation
 - campaign for change in areas where we need governments and corporations to act.

In doing so, we seek to work towards a restoration of relationship between humanity, Creation and the Creator.

2. Progress to date

- a) Since the last Environmental Policy was adopted by General Assembly in 2016, there has been significant progress to celebrate. A full progress review was carried out and reported to Mission Council in July 2020, and there has been further progress since then. Highlights include:
 - More than 300 local URC churches – more than 20% of the total – have now enrolled in the Eco Church and Eco-Congregation programmes. By the start of 2022, 93 of these had achieved Bronze awards, 38 Silver awards, and three churches had achieved Gold awards

- All Synods in England and Wales are now working towards Eco Synod status, with the West Midlands the first to achieve its Bronze award in March 2021, and at least one active Green Apostle has been appointed in each Synod
- Assembly Committees have all considered their environmental responsibilities, and a number have developed specific plans in this area, notably the Education and Learning Committee's Environmental Charter
- Mission Council has agreed resolutions on divestment from investment in fossil fuels (May 2019), single use plastics (November 2020) and recognising the climate emergency (July 2020)
- Most URC bodies have now divested from investment in fossil fuels
- Environmental issues have been the subject of much discussion in *Reform*, at Synod and committee meetings, and in other forums around the Church. Much of this would not have been possible without the involvement and leadership of young people.
- The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated take-up of, and familiarity with, video-conferencing, and many meetings and events are now happening online, with a reduced travel footprint. In July 2021, General Assembly passed a resolution encouraging this shift to online meetings.
- An enormous body of resources and initiatives has been developed to support local churches and other bodies in their environmental activities, the principal ones of which are listed at www.urc.org.uk/greenerchurch

b) However, as the 2020 progress review concluded: 'There is a huge variety of levels of engagement with, enthusiasm for and knowledge of environmental concerns across the Church. Some incredible work is going on, but others have not yet actively engaged with these issues... and it has not provided evidence that the URC is yet doing enough to fulfil its environmental commitments. Progress overall is piecemeal and really only just starting in many areas. That provides a challenge to us all.'

c) While in 2016 an Environmental Task Group was established to 'encourage and assist the United Reformed Church in the implementation of its Environmental Policy and commitment to reduce its carbon footprint', an ongoing challenge has also been about how to ensure mutual accountability for fulfilling the commitments set out in the policy.

3. **Scientific and political developments: 'code red for humanity'**

a) Since 2016, there has also been ever-growing evidence and understanding of the urgency of the climate crisis. In August 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's sixth assessment report warned that climate change was now widespread, rapid and intensifying, and that, unless there were immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, it would be difficult to limit global temperature rises to 1.5°C, or even 2°C, above pre-industrial levels, with potentially catastrophic consequences. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres characterised the situation as 'code red for humanity'. Our partners and

neighbours in the global south also continue to bear witness to increasing climate impacts.

- b) Alongside climate change, there is also increasing awareness of the extent and threat of pollution and biodiversity loss. In 2019, an intergovernmental panel of scientists said one million animal and plant species were now threatened with extinction. A 2020 report found global populations of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles had plunged by 68%, on average, since 1970.
- c) While there has been growing political acknowledgement of the importance of tackling the climate emergency, and to a lesser extent biodiversity loss, practical and policy responses still fall short in many areas. In the UK, in 2019 a '2050 net zero emissions' target was set in law, and in April 2021 the UK Government committed to cut carbon emissions 78% from 1990 levels by 2035. However, as the government's own independent Climate Change Committee has highlighted, there has so far been a significant gap between the pledges the government has made and the action it has taken to meet them. Internationally, while COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021 resulted in a number of significant new commitments, it ultimately failed to unequivocally support this higher ambition with the funding and policy changes needed to respond meaningfully to the magnitude of the emergency that we face.
- d) It is notable that the most prophetic action and pressure for change around environmental concerns continues to come from non-governmental sectors of society, individuals and communities, including faith groups. Ahead of COP26, faith leaders, including the Moderators of General Assembly on behalf of the URC, committed in the Glasgow Multi-Faith Declaration to 'making transformational change in our own lives and in the lives of our communities through individual and collective action'.

4. **Setting the necessary ambition: net zero emissions by 2030**

- a) The proposals and policy below arise from our theological understanding, our assessment of recent scientific and political developments, and our reflections on progress since 2016.
- b) We believe the time is right for the United Reformed Church to set a target and develop plans to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030 at the latest, building on current progress and the plans already in place. This would follow the lead set by a number of Synods, and bring the URC into alignment with the net zero target recently set by a number of other denominations, including the Church of England, the Methodist Church, and the Church of Scotland.
- c) Why 2030? If global warming is to be kept to 1.5°C, the budget for further emissions into the atmosphere is very tight, and it is therefore vital that societies, especially developed industrial ones like the UK, manage the transition to low carbon economies as early as possible. Global carbon dioxide emissions need to

be about halved by 2030 to have a good chance of keeping global warming within 1.5°C. While the UK government has set a net zero target of 2050, the independent Climate Change Committee, which advises government on its climate plans, has said that ‘the 2020s must be the decisive decade of progress and action on climate change’. Change must also be front-loaded; we cannot wait until the end of this period to bring our emissions to zero.

- d) How do we define ‘net zero’? It would be possible to define it in ways that cause minimal inconvenience – such as by allowing the purchase of large amounts of carbon offsets to compensate for continuing with carbon-emitting activities – but that would not be the right thing to do (even though it is currently how the UK government intends to reach its target). It would be unjust for those with sufficient wealth to ‘buy’ their way to net zero by offsetting without addressing the actual cuts in carbon emissions that are needed. However, we also need to recognise that we cannot separate ourselves from the infrastructure, habits or technology of the world we live in. As well as doing all we can to achieving net zero emissions by 2030, we need to push for stronger and faster government action in these areas, and use carbon offsetting as a last resort.
- e) While a net zero target may seem ambitious, practically it would have a huge impact if all churches switched to renewable energy, every congregation and synod was engaging with the Eco Church or Eco-Congregation programme, plans were in place to improve the environmental performance of buildings in the Church’s care, funds were not invested in fossil fuels, and there was carbon offsetting of necessary travel and unavoidable fossil fuel energy use. Widespread adoption of these practices over the next eight years would get us a lot of the way to net zero.
- f) The Environmental Policy below sets out the detailed steps we can and should take across the Church to achieve our net zero ambition, alongside our broader environmental concerns. It includes many commitments the Church has already made, but develops them further in key areas.

5. Accountability, resourcing and support

- a) The updated policy seeks to embed an environmental agenda more fully in the life, priorities and structures of the Church, and ensure mutual accountability for progress, recognising this is a responsibility that is shared across the Church. The policy therefore asks each part of the Church – local churches, synods, and Assembly committees – to develop plans for reaching net zero, appropriate to their role and context, and to be accountable for their implementation. The resolutions also propose the creation of a Net Zero Task Group, with representation drawn from across the Church, to oversee and report on progress, facilitate sharing and learning, and identify common support needs. This would replace the current Environmental Task Group, whose term of mandate expires in July 2022.
- b) As we consulted on the draft of this policy, a key question was about what resources and support would be necessary to enable the implementation of our

environmental commitments across the Church. In many areas, the policy builds on work that is already underway, or can be built into this, and needs no additional resourcing. For local churches, the Eco Church and Eco-Congregation Scotland schemes provide excellent advice and resources, alongside the further resources and tools recommended at www.urc.org.uk/greenerchurch. Synod Green Apostles and others are also able to provide more tailored advice and encouragement, and share expertise and experience across the Church.

- c) However, one area where it was identified that more specific support would be beneficial was around buildings, which represent the largest proportion of the URC's carbon footprint. There is a need for reliable, bespoke, professional advice about making environmental improvements to property – around energy efficiency measures, what is possible in listed buildings, switching heating systems, procurement advice, how to get EV chargers installed, etc. Recent major increases in energy costs only make this work more urgent and vital. One possibility we considered for responding to this need would be the appointment of a national environmental advisor or retained consultancy firm, but we recognise that this is not a time to add to the central demands on the M&M Fund. A number of Synods are considering the appointment of specialist property advisors, and we would encourage that, though it would be a matter of regret if this provision was only possible in the better-off Synods, and if the learning and advice were not available to the whole church.
- d) We would also urge relevant bodies to refocus or redirect existing funding resources (eg property grant schemes) to support environmental initiatives.

Part two: Environmental Policy for the United Reformed Church

1. Purpose

It is our intent, as a body of people committed by our faith to caring for God's Creation, and who recognise the urgency of the climate emergency, to:

- integrate our concern for environmental issues into the whole of our church life
- act urgently to reduce carbon emissions across the whole of church life in order to reach net zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2030
- use the earth's resources wisely
- enjoy, protect and where possible renew the natural environment
- protect and increase biodiversity.

2. Implementation

Because of the urgency of the climate emergency, the focus for this policy is on reducing carbon emissions across the whole of church life. The most significant contributors to the URC's carbon footprint are travel, buildings, energy use, and how investments are used. We will therefore adopt as a minimum the following practices:

3. **Targets and monitoring**

- Calculate and track the carbon footprint of key activities (such as energy use of buildings, travel and transport, and meetings)
- Develop and implement an action plan for making annual reductions in this carbon footprint in order to reach net zero emissions by 2030.

4. **Meetings**

- a) Consider meeting physically less frequently, and making greater use of video-conferencing
- b) Assess the environmental policies and credentials of the venues used for meetings and events
- c) Prioritise the accessibility of meeting locations for public transport.

5. **Travel and transport**

- a) Consider the necessity and benefits of all travel with regard to its environmental impact
- b) Give preference to using lower-carbon modes of transport, and offer incentives for doing so
- c) Introduce a carbon budget for international travel, with planned annual reductions
- d) Establish the principle that for travel undertaken within Europe, the default option should now be to travel by train, unless there is a compelling reason not to do so
- e) Bodies which are requiring or funding any travel on behalf of the URC should also cover the costs of offsetting the associated carbon emissions through an appropriate scheme (consult the URC website for recommended ways to do this).

6. **Buildings**

- a) Build environmental assessments into quinquennial surveys of buildings
- b) Investigate and, where possible, improve the levels of energy efficiency and environmental performance of buildings, including insulation, glazing, ventilation and heating and cooling systems, through refurbishment or replacement
- c) Ensure any buildings purchased have an Energy Performance rating of C or above, or are upgraded immediately after purchase to achieve this rating
- d) Implement measures to reduce energy use
- e) Support the generation of renewable energy – either on our own buildings or by investing in and cooperating with local community projects
- f) Choose green energy tariffs, from suppliers investing in new renewable energy generation, and pay to offset the carbon emissions of any unavoidable use of fossil fuels.

7. **Investments¹**

- a) Not invest in fossil fuel companies whose total turnover is more than 10% derived from the extraction and/or supply of fossil fuels, including thermal coal, natural gas and oil

¹ These provisions reflect the Church's current agreed Ethical Investment guidelines

- b) Where possible, play a proactive role as investors, by engaging further with companies whose activities foster significant carbon emissions, for example the electricity and automotive industries, and producers of energy intensive products (eg cement)
- c) Support investment in renewable energy and clean technologies.

8. Use and disposal of resources

- a) Reduce the use and consumption of unsustainable resources
- b) Work towards eliminating the use of single-use plastics, given their significant environmental impact
- c) Support and promote the reuse and recycling of materials
- d) Dispose of waste in ways that minimise its impact on the environment
- e) Reduce consumption of intensively produced meat and dairy products, and other food with a high carbon footprint.

9. Worship, teaching and education

- a) Ensure that those serving and being prepared for service in the church are cognisant of the global and spiritual context of the climate crisis, as well as the response required by our faith
- b) Compile, promote and use resources for worship and teaching related to environmental themes
- c) Provide, promote and use resources and campaigns that support churches and church members to reduce their environmental footprint.

10. Advocacy

- a) Advocate for action by government, industry and others to foster a deep, rapid and just transition towards a net zero carbon economy
- b) Urge the UK government to set targets and establish policies that will ensure a rapid reduction in greenhouse gas emissions so that net zero is achieved by well before 2050
- c) Campaign with others at local and national level for policies, targets and actions that take steps towards realising these goals
- d) Advocate for global climate justice and international financing mechanisms to be put in place to enable mitigation, adaptation and compensation for loss and damage.

11. Synods and local churches

The General Assembly of the United Reformed Church also:

- a) Endorses and supports the **Eco Church** and **Eco-Congregation Scotland** programmes
- b) Encourages **Synods in England and Wales** to
 - develop and implement plans to progress through the Eco Synod² award levels, which involves includes adopting an environmental policy, having a certain number of Eco Churches in the Synod, considering the

² See ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/eco-synod

environmental impact of buildings, land and investments, and embedding environmental issues in the life of the synod.

- encourage and support local churches to achieve Eco Church status and progress through the award levels, celebrating successes and sharing stories.
 - appoint and empower one or more 'Green Apostles' to act as champions for the issue and offer support across the synod.
- c) Encourages the **National Synod of Scotland** to make equivalent commitments, working with Eco-Congregation Scotland.
- d) Encourages **local churches in England and Wales** to achieve Eco Church status³ and progress through the award levels, which involves considering worship and teaching, management of church buildings and land, community and global engagement, and supporting members to look at their lifestyles.
- e) Encourages **local churches in Scotland** to register and become members of Eco-Congregation⁴ and progress through the award levels, which involves looking at the broad areas of spiritual living, practical living and global living.

³ See www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk

⁴ See www.ecocongregationscotland.org