

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), S <p style="text-align: right;">The group's remit shall be to:</p>

	<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

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

- x 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
- x 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
- x 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)
- x Most URC bodies have now divested from investment in fossil fuels
- x 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.
- x The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated take-

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 –

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:

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

- x Calculate and track the carbon footprint of key activities (such as energy use of buildings, travel and transport, and meetings)
- x 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 ap

- 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

