

Environmental Policy

for the United Reformed Church



As adopted by General Assembly in July 2016 and updated by Mission Council in May 2019

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1. Purpose

- 1.1 This policy is an agreed, documented statement of the United Reformed Church's stance towards the environment in which it operates.
- 1.2 It is the cornerstone of our intent, as a body of people committed to caring for God's creation, to reduce our carbon footprint, improve recycling, minimise waste and improve efficiencies on finite natural resources in all of our operations.
- 1.3 It does not prescribe action for the Church or individual members, churches and synods, but as a statement of intent it provides a basis upon which appropriate action may be undertaken.

2. Introduction¹

- 2.1 As a Church we affirm that care for creation, a just sharing of the world's resources, and a concern for the environment are fundamental Gospel commitments.
- 2.2 We believe that God created and continues to create the whole universe, sustains and nurtures creation, and wills to redeem the whole of creation from its bondage to decay (Romans 8.21). We believe that 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 himself all things by making peace through the blood of his cross (Col 1.16-20). We believe that 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.
- 2.3 We believe that God entrusts creation to our care, calling us to be stewards of it; calls us 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.
- 2.4 We affirm that Christian mission includes caring for God's earth and all creation. It includes 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 grow towards justice and good stewardship as envisaged in the biblical vision of the world as it is meant to be.
- 2.5 We know that human activity has contributed to the degradation of the earth and that this is not the will of God. We believe that this degradation limits the attainment of the fullness of life that God wills for all creation, and is a sin for which we should seek forgiveness. It also imposes most heavily upon the peoples of the developing countries of the world and is part of the intrinsic injustice to which we bear witness. As the Lambeth Declaration 2015 on Climate Change, to which the United Reformed Church is a signatory, affirms, 'The demands of justice as well as of creation

¹ This section draws upon the Baptist Union of Great Britain statement 'A Vision for the Environment' www.christian-ecology.org.uk/bap-env.htm; and the Methodist, Baptist and URC report *Hope in God's Future: Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2009) p.7.

require the nations of the world urgently to limit the global rise in average temperatures. We have a responsibility to act now, for ourselves, our neighbours and for future generations.’²

- 2.6 We recognise the significance of the December 2015 Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). One of its outcomes is to aim to hold ‘the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels’³ recognising that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.

Note: When updates to this policy were considered by Mission Council in 2019, it was acknowledged that both the scientific evidence and the global ambition for action have developed further since 2015. In 2018 the IPCC published a report on the impacts of a greater than 1.5°C global warming and provided an assessment of the actions required to avoid this scenario. This states that for stabilisation of global temperatures at this level, global net zero carbon emissions would most likely need to be achieved around 2050 (with an interquartile range of 2045 to 2055). However this relies on the availability and affordability of substantial amounts of carbon capture and storage technology in the latter half of the 21st Century, a scenario that seems uncertain at best. Mission Council also noted the UK Committee on Climate Change’s recent recommendation that the UK sets a target of achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050; the UK government subsequently committed to this in June 2019.

3. Vision2020

- 3.1 The previous Environmental Policy of the United Reformed Church, adopted by General Assembly in 2004, was founded upon the ‘Five Marks of Mission’,⁴ the fifth of which committed the Church ‘to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation; to sustain and renew the life of the earth’. This policy is informed by the vision2020 strategic framework for mission adopted by General Assembly in 2010,⁵ which declares that the United Reformed Church ‘will be a church that has taken significant steps to safeguard the integrity of creation, to sustain and renew the life of the earth’ (statement 10: The Integrity of Creation). Vision2020 also states that ‘Our churches, reflecting faith in God the creator and sustainer of life in all its fullness, must discover the radical voice of care for the earth that is supported by the way we live.’
- 3.2 This policy echoes vision2020’s affirmation that ‘The changing climate and its consequences for all life on planet earth cannot be over emphasised as the most significant underlying issue of our time’ - and that it is vital that the Church ‘recognizes the reality and fear present in environmental debates and lives hopefully in the present climate.’

4. ‘Hope in God’s Future’

- 4.1 We affirm the view expressed in the 2009 report *Hope in God’s Future* that ‘it is now intellectually and morally irresponsible to fail to acknowledge and address the urgent need for radical cuts in greenhouse gas emissions in order to prevent intolerable damage to human populations and mass extinctions of many plant and animal species.’⁶
- 4.2 We pledge to respond to the report’s call for repentance in the face of our complicity in the sinful structures that are causing wanton damage to the earth, to its creatures and to many poor

² www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/CCB_Lambeth-declaration-2015-on-climate-change.pdf

³ unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement

⁴ anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx

⁵ urc.org.uk/our-mission-strategy-vision2020.html

⁶ *Hope in God’s Future*, p.4.

communities. We also commit to intercede for those threatened by climate change, and to adopt practices and lifestyles consistent with levels of carbon emissions the earth can sustain.⁷ Specifically, we shall strive to act urgently to reduce carbon emissions across the whole of church life in line with the target we are calling on the UK government to achieve, of net zero emissions of greenhouse gases by well before 2050.

5. Shrinking our carbon footprint

- 5.1 Reflecting the commitments contained in the vision2020 statement, in the *Hope in God's Future* report, and in a resolution on climate change passed by General Assembly in 2007, the United Reformed Church re-affirms its pledge to shrink its carbon footprint (the total greenhouse gas emissions caused by the Church's activities) and to strive to protect and restore the environment.
- 5.2 The Church recognises that this pledge calls for both *conversion* on the part of its individual members and *transformation* of its internal structures. The remainder of this policy, which incorporates the suggested indicators contained in statement 10 of vision2020, follows through on this conversion and transformation. We will endeavour to work ecumenically whenever possible and appropriate as we act upon this policy.
- 5.3 Accordingly, our **churches** will be encouraged to:
 - a) carry out a systematic environmental audit of their buildings and follow the strategies outlined below for reducing their carbon footprint; in this the resource *Greening Church Buildings* produced by Eco-Congregation Scotland will be helpful;⁸
 - b) raise awareness, through prayer, preaching, Bible study, teaching and discussion, of the need for confession and repentance in relation to the causes of climate change, and of our calling, as God's redeemed people, to live joyfully, simply and responsibly with respect to God's creation - caring for and treasuring that creation, and celebrating all that is achieved in fulfilling that calling;
 - c) seek to achieve 'Eco Church' status [www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk] in the case of churches in England and Wales, or 'Eco-Congregation' status in the case of churches in Scotland [www.ecocongregationscotland.org];
 - d) celebrate 'Time for Creation' as encouraged by the World Council of Churches.⁹ Creation Time runs from 1 September until 4 October each year;
 - e) ensure that energy is used efficiently and that their buildings are environment friendly through the use of energy-saving technologies and by identifying and using renewable sources of energy as appropriate;
 - f) help members of their congregation to make adjustments in the carbon emissions associated with their lifestyles by supporting them in a personal audit and in finding appropriate strategies;
 - g) involve their children and young people in activities focusing on care for the environment;
 - h) engage their local political representatives, urging them to support policies that take effective steps towards achieving net zero UK carbon emissions by well before 2050;
 - i) support campaigns and popular action around climate change issues as appropriate;
 - j) ensure that church-owned land is used in ways that encourage an enjoyment of nature and both enhance and protect the environment;
 - k) produce a piece of community artwork celebrating the Creator God.

⁷ The A Rocha website contains a comprehensive list of suggested practices – see arocha.org.uk/our-activities/living-lightly-take-action

⁸ www.ecocongregationscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Greening-Church-Buildings.pdf

⁹ www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change/time-for-creation

5.4 Our **synods** will seek to:

- a) encourage their churches to gain 'Eco Church' status (in the case of churches in England and Wales) or 'Eco-Congregation' status (in the case of churches in Scotland); in so doing they will encourage churches to see the positive benefits in terms of the financial savings that environmentally-friendly practices can bring;
- b) develop and implement plans to become 'Eco Synods';¹⁰
- c) ensure that their buildings, including manses, are environment friendly through the use of energy-saving technologies and by identifying and using renewable sources of energy as appropriate;
- d) encourage their churches to work in collaboration with, or initiate, local transition or sustainability groups;
- e) encourage their churches to receive training and support on issues of climate justice and environmental care;
- f) appoint one or more 'Green Apostles' to monitor progress on carbon reduction in their synod (if preferred this role could be differently named, for example 'Sustainability Ambassador');
- g) draw up an 'environmental charter' along the lines of that adopted by North West Synod in 2015.

5.5 Assembly encourages **the Church**:

- a) to lower incrementally its carbon footprint by a significant amount each year by carbon budgeting, that is by setting specific year-on-year reduction targets in the percentage of emissions over a defined period;
- b) to campaign for the UK government to set a target to achieve net zero emissions in the UK by well before 2050, and to campaign at local and national level for policies that take steps towards realising this goal;
- c) to ensure that its buildings are environment friendly through the use of energy-saving technologies and by identifying and using renewable sources of energy as appropriate;
- d) to reduce, where practicable, car and air travel for meetings through the use of videoconferencing. With due regard for distances and costs involved, individual members are encouraged to use transport with minimum impact - to cycle, use buses and trains, and car-share and use energy-efficient vehicles where possible. Members are also encouraged to adopt the practice of carbon off-setting with respect to essential travel by making payments supporting sustainable projects (e.g. through Climate Stewards);¹¹
- e) to promote an environmental theology.

5.6 Assembly also encourages URC Youth to develop a strategy responding to the challenge of climate change.

6. Resources

6.1 We recognise and commend:

- **Eco Church**, which provides an environmental toolkit and support network for local churches in England and Wales: www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk. The parallel scheme in Scotland is **Eco-Congregation**: www.ecocongregationscotland.org
- **Operation Noah**: operationnoah.org
- **Green Christian** (formerly Christian Ecology Link): greenchristian.org.uk

¹⁰ See ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/eeco-synod

¹¹ www.climatestewards.org

- **A Rocha:** arocha.org.uk
- **Climate Stewards:** www.climatestewards.org
- **'Time for Creation'** (World Council of Churches): www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change/time-for-creation
- **Greening Church Buildings** (Eco-Congregation Scotland): www.ecocongregationscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Greening-Church-Buildings.pdf
- **Hope in God's Future:** *Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change* - report of a joint working group on climate change and theology convened by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2009)
- **Laudato si'**, the encyclical of Pope Francis (2015)
- Nick Spencer & Robert White, **Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living** (London: SPCK, 2007)
- the promotion of links with transition towns etc. via www.greenchristian.org.uk/churches-in-transition

Further useful links:

- Latest resources and updates from the URC's Environmental Task Group can be found at **www.urc.org.uk/caring-for-creation**
- **Green Journey** is an energy consultancy, recommended by the Environmental Task Group, which provides churches with a free environmental impact audit and access to renewable energy suppliers. Call 0333 0067177 or visit www.greenjourney.org

Resolutions

General Assembly 2016

1. General Assembly adopts the Environmental Policy, and encourages all committees, synods and local churches to do their best to implement it.
2. General Assembly resolves to appoint a task group until 31 July 2022 in the first instance, of four persons, to be appointed by the nominations committee and funded from the mission committee budget, to monitor the United Reformed Church's progress toward meeting its commitment to reduce its carbon footprint, reporting to the mission committee.

The task group's specific remit shall be to:

- a) compile, produce or commission resources for worship and teaching related to themes contained in the Environmental Policy;
- b) consider the budgetary implications of implementing the Environmental Policy;
- c) commission a suitable individual or body to calculate the Church's carbon footprint, enabling a benchmark to be set against which future reductions in this footprint may be made; and
- d) liaise with the United Reformed Church investment committee, and to assist the relevant bodies within the United Reformed Church regarding decisions relating to the investment of Church funds in fossil fuels.

Mission Council, May 2019

Carbon emissions target

Mission Council, acting on behalf of General Assembly:

- a. urges the UK government to set a target and establish policies to achieve net zero emissions of greenhouse gases in the UK by well before 2050, and updates section 5.3(h) and 5.5(b) of the URC Environmental Policy accordingly
- b. makes a corresponding commitment that as a Church we shall strive to act urgently to reduce carbon emissions across the whole of Church life in line with this target, and updates section 4.2 of the Environmental Policy to give effect to this
- c. calls on URC members, churches and synods to support these commitments in word and in deed.

Environmental Task Group

Mission Council, acting on behalf of General Assembly, agrees that the purpose and remit of the Environmental Task Group shall be restated as follows:

The purpose of the Environmental Task Group, established by General Assembly in 2016, shall be to encourage and assist the United Reformed Church in the implementation of its Environmental Policy and commitment to reduce its carbon footprint.

The group, appointed until 31 July 2022 in the first instance, shall be funded from the mission committee budget, and report to the mission committee.

The task group's remit shall be to:

1. compile, produce or commission resources for worship and teaching related to themes contained in the Environmental Policy;
2. champion and promote the Eco Church and Eco-Congregation Scotland programmes across the Church;
3. consider the budgetary implications of implementing the Environmental Policy;
4. collate and share data to enable the Church to track and reflect on progress towards reducing its carbon footprint;
5. liaise with the United Reformed Church investment committee, and to assist the relevant bodies within the United Reformed Church regarding decisions relating to the investment of Church funds in fossil fuels;
6. encourage and assist Assembly Committees and others in developing new ways of meeting and working which have environmental benefits; and
7. keep the Environmental Policy under review in the light of progress, new evidence and an evolving context, and bring proposals and recommendations to and through the mission committee for further steps that the URC could take to fulfil the commitments set out in the policy.

Creating a climate of change: a new approach to ethical investment

Mission Council, acting on behalf of the General Assembly, agrees that the ethical investment guidelines on climate change issues be updated to reflect the following:

It is the wish of the United Reformed Church that those responsible for investment decisions on behalf of the Church and its Trust bodies should:

- 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
- b) complete the divestment required to fulfil this decision by the time the URC General Assembly meets in 2020
- c) widen their 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 (e.g. cement)
- d) refocus the Church's investment portfolio by scaling up investment in renewable energy and clean technologies.

Mission Council further resolves to:

- e) encourage publicity of these actions and the rationale behind them, so that the URC can use its influence to advocate an end to the exploration for new oil and gas reserves, and the managed decline of fossil fuel production
- f) advocate to the UK government and others for action to foster the transition to a net zero carbon economy.
- g) encourage URC synods and local URC churches with investments to divest from fossil fuels, and reinvest in clean alternatives
- h) support and encourage churches and church members to reduce their consumption of fossil fuels, and so participate in a just transition to a zero- carbon future
- i) request the Resources Centres for Learning to ensure that those being prepared for service and leadership are cognisant of the global and spiritual context of the climate crisis.