

Paper I1

Report to Assembly Executive 2023

Mission Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Sarah Lane Cawte, Convenor, Mission Committee slanecawte@gmail.com Philip Brooks, Deputy General Secretary (Mission) philip.brooks@urc.org.uk
Action required	For information.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	This report provides an update on the work of the Mission Committee and Mission Team since General Assembly 2023.
Main points	The report covers the areas for which Mission Committee is responsible, namely: Church and Society, Ecumenical Relations, Interfaith Relations, Greenbelt, Commitment for Life, Global and Intercultural Ministries, Legacies of Slavery, Racial Justice, Fresh Expressions, Mission and Evangelism, Rural Mission, Net Zero Task Group.
Previous relevant documents	Papers I2, I3, I4, General Assembly 2023 Book of Reports Resolution 31, 51a and 71, Record of Assembly 2023.
Consultation has taken place with...	Within the context of the ongoing work of Mission Team and Mission Committee.

Summary of impact

Financial	All the work in this report is contained within current budgets.
External (eg ecumenical)	The report outlines several areas of UK and global ecumenical interaction.

1. Commitment for Life

- 1.1 Commitment for Life's thirty-year presence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (loPt), in partnership with Christian Aid, demonstrates the URC's effective and practical long-term commitment to the region. This presence and support are particularly needed at times of intense disruption and does a great deal more than making calls for change or signing petitions. That said, the URC has given strong assent to Christian Aid's calls for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, the unconditional release of all hostages and adherence to international law.
- 1.2 Commitment for Life is currently working with Northern College to offer lay-preacher support for the creation of Commitment for Life services of worship. The Revd Ana Gobledale has volunteered to lead Commitment for Life services of worship among the northerly Synods.
- 1.3 There has been excellent feedback from URC congregations and members who have used the Go-with-Greta resources as online or Bible Study material. Kevin and Suzanne met with Nuzhat Jabin, the Christian Aid country manager from Bangladesh, who has indicated her willingness to assist Commitment for Life on a Greta-goes-to Bangladesh publication in 2024.
- 1.4 We are grateful to Wessex Synod for our invitation to the Wessex Big-Day-Out.
- 1.5 Commitment for Life donations are on track at the time of writing, with final 2023 figures expected by the end of January 2024. We are grateful for the enormous generosity of URC members in the face of the cost-of-living crisis.
- 1.6 Commitment for Life is in discussion with Christian Aid on a range of forward-looking issues including a possible link up with the URC Legacies of Slavery work, support for Gaza, and for the ongoing crisis of Ukrainian refugees with reference to General Assembly resolution 71.
- 1.7 The URC is a voting member at the Christian Aid AGM. At the last meeting, held on 28 November, it was agreed that, following the retirement of John Sentamu, the appointment of the new Chair would be decided by members remotely without having to convene a special AGM. CEO Patrick Watt reported that total income reached a new high of £90 million (not adjusted for inflation) despite significant economic headwinds. Institutional giving was up, although not helped by a decline in UK government giving (FCDO) and the loss of EU funding opportunities. Christian Aid is determined to shift decision-making to the local level along with increasing gender and ethnic diversity as it journeys towards becoming a truly anti-racist organisation. At this year's Christian Aid CEO's Consultation, there was an evening lecture with input from Kenneth Mtata (WCC) Nicola Brady (CTBI) and Susan Durber (WCC/URC). The lecture itself was delivered by Amina J. Mohammed, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Christian Aid's 2022/3 annual report and accounts can be found [here](#).

2. Interfaith Enabling Group (IEG)

- 2.1 The IEG has agreed to support Minority Concern, a group led by Aftab Mughal in Northwest Synod that seeks to foster interfaith relations in Pakistan, particularly in the wake of attacks on Christian minorities in the country.
- 2.2 The recent violence in Israel and Gaza has been deeply distressing. How should Christians, who are committed to dialogue, reconciliation, justice, and peace, respond? The CTBI Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group has produced a short resource that offers reflection and pointers for discussion out of a context of ecumenical and inter faith relations.
- 2.3 On Friday 8 December 2023 the US was the only government to vote against a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate, humanitarian ceasefire. Amnesty International's General Secretary has characterised the US veto as a display of 'callous disregard for civilian suffering in the face of a staggering death toll.' The US veto and the UK government's abstention are deeply disappointing. Their actions locate them in contrast to the URC, together with faith communities all over the world, who have called for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire.
- 2.4 The URC continues to respond ecumenically to the crisis in Gaza and Southern Israel, knowing how problematic any response, or no response, might well be viewed. Our Moderator, the Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson, is a signatory to the Christian Aid call for an immediate, unconditional ceasefire and release of all hostages. Tessa has also signed a Washington DC based call from churches to the US and UK governments advocating for an immediate ceasefire.
- 2.5 From 22-28 October our General Assembly Moderator, the Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson, represented the URC on the Council of Christians and Jews' visit to Poland. The group progressed from Warsaw to Lodz, then on to Krakow, including a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The visits to Holocaust sites followed a broad progression from ghettos to deportation stations, and to concentration camps. Alongside this history, the group explored Jewish history before and after the Second World War. Participants engaged in conversations about interfaith issues in contemporary Poland, particularly around the question of preserving Jewish memory. Given the significant increase in the occurrence of antisemitic incidents in the UK, it is vital that we continue to hold open our Christian-Jewish relations so that the violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory is not imported into the UK. The URC was well represented at the 2023 Council for Christian and Jews' Rabbi and Clergy event at Westminster Cathedral in November.
- 2.6 The URC along with the UK Methodist Church has asked congregations not to light their second Advent candle (the 'Bethlehem Candle') to remember all those who have been affected by the devastating violence. A suggested liturgy can be found here on the Commitment for Life website.

Kevin Snyman, Programme Officer (Global Justice and Partnerships)

3. Church and Society

- 3.1 Responding to poverty: General Assembly 2023 backed a strong call to action in response to the gospel call to challenge poverty and structures that cause marginalisation (Paper I2/Resolution 31), which has been taken forward as a priority.
- 3.2 The URC, through the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT), has been at the heart of the formation of Let's End Poverty, a new social movement that has come together to build the public and political will to tackle poverty in the UK. Its initial focus is on putting poverty on the agenda ahead of the next General Election. After a preview at Greenbelt, it was launched with ten regional founding assemblies in October 2023, and a rolling programme of online events. Support is growing and includes a diverse range of faith groups, local and national charities, trade unions and individuals, united behind a vision for a UK where poverty can't keep anyone down. Find out more and get involved at www.letsendpoverty.co.uk
- 3.3 A new course for small groups has been produced to help local churches to gain a deeper understanding of experiences of poverty, both in the UK and globally, and encourage action in the run up to the election. The Act on Poverty course has been produced by Christian Aid in conjunction with JPIT, Church Action on Poverty, the Trussell Trust and several other organisations. It is designed for use in Lent or later in 2024, and includes Bible study material, audio and video resources, and prompts for discussion and action. Find out more here.
- 3.4 Preparing for a General Election: An election will take place by January 2025 at the latest and creates many opportunities for churches and members to engage with the political process, build relationships with candidates, raise issues of concern and seek commitments to act. JPIT has produced suggestions for manifestos and questions based on 'Six Hopes' for society around poverty, refugees, the environment, peace, the economy, and politics itself. People need to be aware of changes to constituencies and also to electoral law, which means that photographic ID will be needed in order to vote (free Voter Authority Certificates are available but need to be applied for in advance).
- 3.5 Guidance for churches about holding hustings and other kinds of meetings with candidates has been prepared in conjunction with ecumenical partners. JPIT also wants to encourage churches to build ongoing relationships with MPs through its new Constituency Action Network, which will be launched in the spring, and provide people with support and resources in doing that.
- 3.6 Preaching politics: JPIT produces a weekly podcast, also available on YouTube, in which the host and a guest discuss the political dimensions present in the lectionary Bible readings and reflect on how they connect with the week's current news and our calling to be justice seekers. The host for the Spring 2023 season of 'Politics in the Pulpit?' is the Revd Jacky Embrey, recently retired URC minister and former Mersey Synod Moderator. Find it wherever you get your podcasts.

Simeon Mitchell, Secretary for Church and Society

The JPIT website (www.jpit.uk) provides more information on the above.

4. Mission team staff change

After more than six years as the URC's Secretary for Church and Society, Simeon Mitchell moved to the Methodist Church in January 2024 to take up the permanent position as Team Leader of the Joint Public Issues Team. This is a familiar role to Simeon since he has ably filled the role as acting JPIT Team Leader for the last couple of years. During his time with the URC, Simeon has guided us as a denomination with considerable skill and wisdom, always ensuring that the URC has been at the forefront of engagement in the public sphere, alongside our ecumenical partners. His incisive knowledge relating to Church and Society matters and his passion for social justice have been widely appreciated across the URC. Fortunately, we will have the benefit of continuing to work with Simeon through JPIT and he will become a very near neighbour at the new Methodist Church House in Tavistock Place when it opens in mid-2024. We wish Simeon every blessing in his appointment.

Philip Brooks, Deputy General Secretary (Mission)

5. Global and Intercultural Ministries (GIM)

In the period since General Assembly 2023, racial justice has remained high on the Global and Intercultural Ministries agenda. Many people – within our own Church, ecumenical partners, and around the globe – share a sense that we are operating in a particular window of opportunity in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, an event which (re)awakened awareness of racism and racial injustice as a reality in our world. But it is a window that will not last forever. Racial injustice has a very long history; it comes in many guises; and it is a beast which will not be defeated easily. Our commitment to overcoming racial injustice – within our own body, and in our world – must be even more determined and long-lasting than the beast itself.

5.1 Legacies of Slavery (LoS): URC Commitment to Repairing Justice

Following the affirmation of General Assembly 2023, the LoS task group has been working to further the three-pronged commitment to acts of Repairing Justice (Reparations):

5.1.1 Local – within our own body: Anti-Racism Training

Professor Anthony Reddie has committed to delivering nine training days between January and May 2024, with up to 15 participants in each. (Further dates may be scheduled as necessary.) Members of the General Secretariat, Mission Committee, Mission Team and LoS task group will be part of pilot sessions in January 2024, and we are working to establish a rolling programme to train all the groups/individuals highlighted in Paper I3 (GA23).

It is extremely gratifying that many individuals and groups are expressing eagerness to receive the training, even while we are mindful that the prospect is not being welcomed by all.

5.1.2 Regional – within the UK: Mentoring Support and Pioneering Posts

The regional sub-group is considering how best to develop this proposal to support the mentoring of young black men (and possibly women) in four locations across the UK, which have significant links with transatlantic

slavery. They are exploring, with partner agencies, how four related pioneering posts might be established, with the potential to be hosted by local URCs. If an appropriate coalition of funding support can be put in place, the postholders would collaborate in developing joined up working across the whole URC.

The regional proposals are ambitious and will be the most complex strand to develop. The sub-group is carrying out research and seeking the input of external partners who can offer on-the-ground support, insights and experience.

5.1.3 Global: Working with Partners in the Caribbean and Africa (directly and/or through CWM)

Conversations are ongoing with partners in Jamaica as to how we might support work they are already advocating through the Churches' Reparations Action Forum (CRAF) 7-Point Plan for Reparations and exploring new project ideas to be developed together.

An Ecumenical Pilgrimage scheduled for April 2024 will see representatives from the URC, Church of Scotland and Christian Aid travelling together to Jamaica to express solidarity with partners in the Caribbean, and to further develop our individual church/organisational journeys.

5.2 Racial justice

5.2.1 Making Spaces

This 24-hour conference was held in July 2023, gathering 25 individuals from across the breadth of the URC to consider the predominantly white make-up in positions of senior leadership and influence in our Church, to share honest conversations, and to explore together how we might bring about change. Participants included people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, lay and ordained, individuals who occupy senior leadership positions and some who have applied unsuccessfully in the past. The event felt deeply meaningful and was very well received. It was requested that this should become an annual event, inviting different participants each time, and working in tandem with the anti-racism training to help bring about an anti-racist Church.

5.2.2 Speaking engagements/leading worship

The GIM Secretary has been pleased to accept invitations to share the URC's LoS/Anti-Racist Church journey through speaking and preaching engagements. It is a priority that local church Ministers and members should have opportunity to engage, to ask questions, and to help shape the journey if the commitment to becoming an anti-racist Church is to be understood and embraced as widely as possible.

5.2.3 Ecumenical

The URC continues to have an active presence in ecumenical racial justice conversations. We are amongst the founding members of both the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum (RJAF), coordinated by Churches Together in Britain & Ireland (CTBI) and the Baptist Union of Great Britain, and the

Racial Justice Working Group, coordinated by Churches Together in England (CTE). The networks work together and independently to engage with individuals (particularly in light of emerging crises), churches, public policies, politics, and the police. Recent work has seen the GIM Secretary serving on the planning group for a Windrush 75th Anniversary Service held at Southwark Cathedral on 22 June and delivering workshops for a 'Church and Reparations' conference in October 2023.

The GIM Secretary continues to serve on the Methodist Church's Reparations Group.

5.3 Council for World Mission (CWM)

5.3.1 CWM (Africa Region) Church and Racism Consultation

This took place in South Africa in October 2023 and was an opportunity to reflect on issues of colonialism and racism in different contexts, including several regions of Africa, the Caribbean, and the UK. The GIM Secretary was amongst five people attending from the UK. While hugely educational in its own right, this was also an opportunity to develop links to feed into the URC's repairing justice proposals.

5.3.2 CWM Member Churches General Secretaries' Conference

This was held in Singapore in October 2023. The Deputy General Secretary (Mission) attended on behalf of the URC. 28 member churches were represented out of a total of 32, drawn from six regions worldwide. It was an opportunity to meet with partner churches, learn more of the work of CWM and to contribute to the global discussions.

5.3.3 CWM Youth and Racism gathering

This was held in partnership with the URC in December 2023. Participants were drawn from Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, with the programme being planned and co-hosted by the GIM Secretary and Thames North Synod CYDO, Lorraine Downer, who is seconded to the LoS task group.

5.3.4 CWM Communications Workshop

This took place in Kuala Lumpur in January 2024 and was attended by the URC Head of Communications.

5.3.5 CWM Caribbean and Europe Gender Justice Working Group

The GIM Secretary continues to contribute to this group which is currently exploring how to embed its work in the two regions and beyond.

5.4 Global work

5.4.1 Partners in Mission

The URC continues to host two Partners in Mission (missionaries) sent by CWM partner churches to serve in our midst. The Revd Yufen Chen is located in Thames North Synod, sent by the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, while Lay-Missioner Ms So Young Jung, sent by the Presbyterian Church of Korea, is based in Southern Synod. The URC also has two partners sent by us to serve with the Pacific Theological College in Fiji, the Revd Melanie Smith and the Revd Mark Meatcher. Oversight of these invaluable relationships is the responsibility of the GIM Secretary in

partnership with CWM, and recent work has been intricate and time-consuming.

5.4.2 The Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM)

The long-standing relationship between the URC and the PCM was interrupted by the February 2021 military coup, making it impossible for us to continue as before, yet difficult to shape meaningful ways to proceed. We are extremely grateful that recent months have seen the relationship renewed, with many thanks for the efforts of Lindsey Brown, the URC Mission Support Officer. We were delighted to host the PCM's new General Secretary, the Revd Pek Muan Cuang in June and October of 2023, and to hear news of how the PCM is continuing its work even in the midst of unimaginable difficulties. We are acutely aware that this partner Church is requesting our prayerful and practical support. The GIM Secretary and Lindsey are consulting more widely to develop opportunities for the URC as a whole, and for individual URC members and congregations, to offer their support.

5.5 Conclusion

The brevity and simplicity of this report do not reflect the time invested to develop the areas being outlined, nor the 'background work' which is not reported at all. This is not a complaint, but an observation. The GIM remit is broad, and it is challenging, but it is also hugely rewarding, and it is satisfying to report the progress being made.

Karen Campbell, Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries

6. Fresh Expressions

Fresh Expressions are new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don't 'go to church.'

www.freshexpressions.org.uk

6.1 The Newbigin Pioneering Hub

Since the report for General Assembly 2023, the first students of the Newbigin Pioneering Hub have marked the end of their year-long course by presenting their projects to a panel of experienced pioneers and church leaders. They received their Certificate in Pioneer Mission from the Church Mission Society (CMS), and we congratulate them all. Applications for funding of Pioneer Projects are welcomed via the Discipleship Development Fund, with smaller grants available from the Mission Enabling Fund. URC students who have completed the course are now invited to apply to become Assembly Accredited Lay Pioneers. The second cohort of students is now underway. See here for further information about the course and the Newbigin Pioneering Hub.

6.2 Thames North Pioneering Hub

We welcome this new pioneering project in Thames North Synod, which is intended to develop a fresh expression of church in East London.

6.3 'New Ways of Being Church' conference in the Pfalz

As Coordinator for Fresh Expressions in the URC, I shall be writing and presenting a paper at this conference in April 2024, with our long-standing partner churches in the Pfalz (the Palatinate region of Germany). The brief is to offer an overview of fresh expressions of church in the denomination (including ecumenical projects). To this end, we need to try to map our fresh expressions, and to understand how they interact with the more traditional churches.

Any wisdom from around the Synods would be most welcome. Please contact linda.rayner@urc.org.uk

6.4 Fresh Expressions Partners' Learning Community 2024

The Learning Community took place in January 2024 and a team of five Synod Mission Enablers, plus the Coordinator for Fresh Expressions attended. The Learning Community enables the team to consider the way forward for fresh expressions within the URC. The guest speaker was Emily Bradbury, founder and director of Courage to Thrive CIC.

6.5 URC Rural Hub

Many Synods have a named person who holds the brief for rural activities within the Synod. The first gathering of these officers took place online in December 2023. Intended to complement the ecumenical gatherings that are arranged from the Arthur Rank Centre, the plan for the first gathering was to discuss the format for the future, and was intended as a hub for mutual support and exchange of ideas and resources.

Linda Rayner, Fresh Expressions Coordinator

7. Ecumenical report

7.1 General Assembly 2023 Resolution 38

General Assembly endorses the measures for ecumenical working and resource sharing outlined in Reinventing the Ecumenical Vision of the URC Part 2 and encourages Synods to consider how they might make use of them to assist in addressing the areas of under-resourcing of our ecumenical commitments and in developing new ecumenical relationships.

7.1.1 With Church of England and Baptist partners we ran a joint training and information session for regional leaders (Moderators in the URC) on CTE's *Flexible Framework for Unity in Mission*. This attracted over 50 leaders, including nine URC Moderators.

7.1.2 With Methodist, Church of England, Salvation Army and Baptist partners we have drafted a 'boilerplate' job description for an Ecumenical Enabler, a paid, time-limited role to work in a specific local context. Initially a URC proposal, when introduced to our ecumenical partners there was a great deal of interest, and it was then further developed together.

7.1.3 We have drafted and circulated a job description for a full-time paid Ecumenical Officer role for those Synods considering this investment.

- 7.1.4 We are actively involved in both the South East Northumberland Ecumenical Area (SENEA) and Hertfordshire and Essex Borders Ecumenical Area (HAEBEA) conversations around forming Partnership Agreements in the face of the difficulties they have faced with the Charity Commission accepting their constitutions.
- 7.1.5 Lindsey Brown is actively involved in a number of pieces of work with CTE, including representing the URC at their Enabling Group, the CTE Group for Evangelisation, the Living with Diversity Working Group and the planning and delivery teams for the Learning to be Missionary Disciples conference, the New Ecumenical Officers Training Residential and the All Ecumenical Officers Residential.

7.2 General Assembly Resolution 39

General Assembly instructs the Ministries Committee to allocate six ministry of Word and Sacraments posts, available to Synods by application and open to all ministers of Word and Sacraments with a specific call to ecumenical working, and which will not reduce Synod stipendiary ministry deployment targets, to provide ordained ministry of word and sacrament in identified local ecumenical contexts, whether existing or new.

Working with Ministries and the Moderators' meeting, there has been interest shown in these posts, and the first phase of the application process has begun.

7.3 Ecumenical Dialogue Groups

- 7.3.1 The Roman Catholic/URC Dialogue group is coming to the end of its third quinquennial and is preparing what is hoped to be a practical document for local churches on the theme of *Journeying Together*. This will be ready by GA 2024. Since GA 2023 we have met in Edinburgh and had very productive conversations with local congregations and heard from the Church of Scotland on the subject of the St Margaret's Declaration, a significant ecumenical document between them and the Catholic Church in Scotland.
- 7.3.2 The Methodist/URC Liaison Group was unable to meet as scheduled this autumn in part due to the current vacancy on the Methodist Connexional Team.
- 7.3.3 The Revd Nigel Uden attended the November Synod of the Church of England, in place of our usual representative, the Revd Tim Meadows.
- 7.3.4 Lindsey Brown represented the URC at a recent meeting of the Church of England's Council for Christian Unity (there is currently no URC/CofE dialogue group in the absence of a nominated Bishop). There were many interesting reports discussed, including work with the Orthodox Church and relations with Ukraine. There was also a useful discussion about sharing buildings with ecumenical partners, which the URC could be helpful with.

8. Joint Mission and Discipleship Work: Mission Team

8.1 General Assembly Resolution 51a

General Assembly asks the Mission and Discipleship Departments to look at how mission, evangelism and ministry which would lead to the emergence of new United Reformed Church communities of discipleship and worship might be encouraged and resourced.

8.1.1 We welcome this resolution and are delighted to rise to the challenge of how to encourage URC churches (often working ecumenically) to set up new expressions of 'church' (using the term 'church' in its widest sense and including fresh expressions of church). This work sits alongside the paper from the Worship Faith and Order Committee '*Ecclesiological considerations for the United Reformed Church in conversation with Fresh Expressions*', which was mentioned in the General Assembly report and clarifies the position of the denomination regarding accepting new expressions of church as United Reformed Churches.

8.2 The following work has been undertaken:

8.2.1 The resolution was discussed at Mission Committee in September 2023, at the Joint (Mission and Discipleship) departments' gathering and also at the Mission Enablers' residential in December 2023. It will go to CRCWs, SCMs, RCL staff and CYDOs before we submit a formal response.

8.2.2 A joint Mission and Discipleship residential is being planned to respond to Resolution 51a and to invest in national and Synod facilitators (the networks) in 'curating and producing appropriate discipleship resources' to support local churches.

8.2.3 The Mission and Discipleship teams have begun work on pooling resources to assist in structural and resource support for new communities of Christian discipleship. This is currently taking three parts: mapping existing pioneering and 'plant' work; examining process; identifying opportunities.

8.2.4 The Mission Team, with Mission Committee and the Mission Enablers Network, are working on a number of responses to questions around evangelism and how we address and resource it. One immediate practical response is to offer a church-wide webinar in the first half of 2024 and we are planning, with the Minister for Digital Worship, Andy Braunston, a series of Daily Devotions on the theme of evangelism to tie in with this. We are also examining both URC and other evangelism resources, including Leading Your Church Into Growth (LYCIG), with a view to wider sharing and potential partnerships.

Lindsey Brown, Mission Support Officer

9. Greenbelt

9.1 The URC's presence at Greenbelt in 2023 was exciting. It was our second year providing a low-cost café on site and of enabling the youth provision on site. This experience showed in how we had developed our provision of food, craft and a

programme of engagement in social issues, plus two popular and highly regarded youth spaces.

- 9.2 We continued the theme of 'Revolting Christians', which encourages Christians, inspired by the example of Jesus, Christians throughout history and Christians today, to take a stand against injustice and make a difference.
- 9.3 This felt very much like a flagship event for the URC, giving us significant visibility at a large Christian festival. Over sixty URC volunteers provided the welcoming environment that attracted large numbers to our marquee, which was packed to capacity almost constantly. Many of our volunteers shared how much being on the team meant to them personally and in their own faith journey.
- 9.4 In 2024, we will continue with our prominent low-cost café at Greenbelt, building again on our experience of the last two years. We will be working hard on growing the racial diversity of our team and also aiming to support a number of volunteers who are experiencing poverty, for whom coming to an event like Greenbelt would be impossible.
- 9.5 We will be putting together a proposal for General Assembly 2024, looking at how the Church can support our work at Greenbelt in 2025-2027. We are actively discussing with Greenbelt's management team an innovative approach to our involvement in 2025 which enables us to be 'even more URC' in creating a space which welcomes an even wider range of festivalgoers and enables us to reach marginalised groups and young people in new ways.

Roo Stewart, Programme Officer (Church and Society)

10. Net Zero Task Group

- 10.1 The Net Zero Task Group (NZTG) has met monthly by Zoom since March 2023. The initial kaleidoscope of issues, opinions and options occupied our first meetings. Aware that we can't resolve everything before starting something, we have begun to shape an approach to our task. It is far-reaching. For the URC to achieve net zero involves more transformation than adaptation, and requires us to rediscover and embrace the Church's fundamental nature, letting go much that is cherished.
- 10.2 Assessing the current situation. General Assembly (GA) resolved to "reduce carbon emissions across the whole of church life, with the aim of reaching net zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2030" and instructed "the committees and bodies under its control ... to adopt as a minimum the practices it sets out." A working distinction is made between: GA bodies that are required to comply, and associated bodies that GA 'encourages' to act (Trusts, Synods and local churches).
 - 10.2.1 Feedback from GA committees (initiated prior to NZTG) indicates that Net Zero 2030 is being taken seriously. There is varied understanding of the role of carbon off-setting and the place of in-person (face-to-face) meetings. We have been particularly helped by work already undertaken by Education and Learning. NZTG can help by providing some guidelines (or signposting) around:

- Buildings (and other premises)
- Transport (reduction and low-carbon)
- Venues (checklist to support selecting carbon-conscious settings).

- 10.2.2 Feedback from Synods indicates a varied picture, but most have an appropriate Environmental Policy. We have consulted with Synod Property officers regarding the information and resources they need when working with Local Churches. We are working on coordinating the guidance documentation produced by Synods. NZTG sees the Green Apostles network as a key partner that has already moved mountains.
- 10.2.3 Local churches vary between Gold Award Eco-Churches (Scotland: Eco-Congregations) and those which feel they have no capacity to move substantially towards net zero. Eco-Church/Congregation is now a major movement in British churches (with over 7,000 registered with the programme). A commitment to net zero is not a condition of registration, but it is still hugely encouraging that about a third of URC congregations have begun the journey. NZTG intends to use *Reform* to encourage local churches, but as yet we have been trying to see our way and have failed to find the capacity to produce an article. However, *Reform* has already been doing a good job of showcasing Eco Churches, with a profile of the newly Gold award-winning Clitheroe URC in the most recent issue.
- 10.2.4 Trusts and other associated bodies have not yet been asked to provide information, though the URC Trust is represented in our group.
- 10.3 Offering support and advice to all church bodies is largely about signposting to existing expertise and resources. NZTG has begun to look at how knowledge, resources and tools already in existence (or being developed) can be adapted to URC needs. Larger denominations have been able to assign/appoint staff capacity that the URC is unable to do. We have agreed a working partnership with the Methodists in which each denomination has a representative sitting with the other working group. NZTG has appointed Matthew McDade as our liaison for this partnership.
- 10.4 Finance, buildings and a pastoral earthquake. The willingness to act far exceeds the capacity of central funds to enable action. Synods vary in financial capacity, but probably none could enable all their existing local church buildings, manses and transport to reach minimal emissions. Church closures may ease this to a degree, but we will also need to encourage thinking that local churches may find unpalatable. NZTG has scarcely begun to assess the impact of the funding shortfall, but it is clear that a massive rationalisation of buildings is called for. The likely scale of disposal of buildings necessary to achieve net zero presents the Church with a substantial pastoral challenge and calls for a rediscovery of local church identity that is free of ties to buildings that cannot affordably be made suitable. There are encouraging signs (eg in the Buildings Forum, Green Apostles and some Synods) that some parts of the church are showing capacity for radical

action. It is noted that encouraging Church members to consider their own Net Zero opportunities would quite possibly have a bigger impact than focusing upon Church buildings.

- 10.5 Energy. Net zero means de-carbonising all our uses of energy, replacing fossil fuels with green energy. Even Zoom meetings are not currently carbon-neutral as data centres use significant energy. The transformation of all buildings retained (see 10.4 above) to reduce consumption and use only appropriate energy is a major part of the challenge. Offsetting energy from fossil fuels is not a sustainable option (see 10.7 below).
- 10.6 Travel: The Education and Learning Committee developed a spreadsheet to optimise journeys. NZTG will explore how this tool can be adapted for use across the church. Reducing in-person (face-to-face) meetings where it is viable to use internet platforms is an obvious direction of travel for committees and other bodies to develop.
- 10.7 Carbon offsetting. In response to requests and to our perception of uncertainties and abuses, NZTG has produced a statement on carbon off-setting (see appendix below) and offers it as potential URC policy.
- 10.8 Children will live the whole of their lives with the impacts of our carbon and other greenhouse emissions. NZTG is intentional about hearing the wisdom, insights, concerns and hopes of children and will encourage the whole Church to engage with the children.
- 10.9 NZTG feels that we have not made sufficient progress with our task. We recognise the magnitude of the challenge facing the Church, the limited time to accomplish it and the sense that our group includes key people who are already stretched. Maybe drawing up two cycles of three-year plans will help us become more effectively focussed.

Chris Baillie (Convenor), on behalf of the Net Zero Task Group: Philip Brooks (DGS Mission); Judy Harris (URC Children); Victoria James (COO); Jamie Laird (URC Youth, co-opted); Matthew McDade (Property Officers); Simeon Mitchell (Secretary for Church and Society); Eileen Newington (Green Apostles); Clifford Patten (URC Trust); Carole Sired (Staff); George Watt (Synod moderator); Maya Withall (URC Youth); Alan Yates (Finance Committee)

10.10 Appendix: NZTG Statement on Carbon Offsetting

Carbon offsetting is part of the landscape of efforts to combat climate change. To help us determine how it fits in to the URC Environmental Policy and net zero target, NZTG offers the following statement.

1. Eliminating emissions as far as possible is the priority. Offsetting does not offer an alternative to this. Only when all possible measures to eliminate carbon (and other) emissions have been identified should offsetting be considered. It is a last resort.
2. Some emissions are unavoidable, achieving net zero will involve offsetting these.

Many unavoidable emissions can be measured or estimated, and steps to offset these can be calculated. Additional allowance should also be made to offset those emissions which cannot be adequately quantified.

3. Carbon offset schemes need to be chosen with care. Some are scams, some enable 'greenwashing,' some are ineffective, some damage biodiversity and/or local communities. Pending the identification of an accreditation body, we recommend using schemes that have been verified (eg www.goldstandard.org/tags/carbon-offsetting; www.climatestewards.org/offset). Good schemes will take up and store atmospheric carbon, and will add benefits such as:
 - a) enabling carbon-neutral technologies where they cannot be locally afforded
 - b) helping restore indigenous biodiversity
 - c) supporting local communities.
4. Offsetting is part of the journey rather than the destination. When we do it, we have not arrived and should find ways to further reduce emissions. Offsetting can also be used during the period between a decision on an emissions-reduction measure and its implementation.