

Paper 12

Environmental Policy progress review

Mission Committee – Net Zero Task Group

Basic information

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Action required	Update and decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 36 General Assembly requests that Synods and related Trust companies should report by 31 March each year on an assessment of progress made during the previous calendar year in reducing carbon emissions across the Synod, including Synod Offices, manses and church buildings held in trust by Synod Trust companies and Synod activities and that this report be shared with the Net Zero Task Group so that overall progress across all the Synods can be recorded and reported to General Assembly annually by the Mission Committee.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	This update seeks to encourage the Church to respond to the Environmental Policy adopted at the 2022 General Assembly.
Main points	Assessing progress made; highlighting potential actions and resources; and committing the denomination to reporting its progress in terms of reducing carbon emissions.
Previous relevant documents	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) Environmental Policy (General Assembly, July 2022).
Consultation has taken place with...	The Net Zero Task Group has representatives drawn from the Moderators, the Finance Committee, the URC Trust, the General Secretariat, URC Youth, Synod Property Officers and

	Green Apostles. Consultation is continuing with all Assembly Committees.
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Summary of impact

Financial	This report does not propose any additional expenditure. Some areas of practice are recommended which should reduce costs. Work to make our buildings more environmentally efficient will be costly, but these continue to be decisions for Synods and local churches in response to the URC's Environmental Policy adopted at General Assembly 2022.
External (eg ecumenical)	The Net Zero Task Group has drawn especially on the resources of the Methodist Church and the Church of England.

The Environmental Policy adopted by the 2022 General Assembly set an ambitious and urgent target for the denomination: 'to reduce carbon emissions across the whole of church life, with the aim of reaching net zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2030'. It mandated the formation of a Net Zero Task Group (NZTG) to oversee progress to this aim; to identify and advocate for resources; to engage with Assembly committees; and to encourage the sharing of experiences and achievements across the Church.

Two years on from this bold decision, it seems appropriate to review progress towards the aims expressed. For the URC to achieve net zero involves more transformation than adaptation. Most notably in our buildings, but significantly in our forms of transport and in our gatherings, we are looking at fundamental changes. These require us to rediscover and embrace the Church's fundamental nature, while potentially letting go of expressions of Church that are long-established and much cherished.

1. What has the NZTG concluded so far?

- a) It is *achievable* to '**reduce** carbon emissions across the whole of church life by 2030'.
- b) It is potentially *achievable* to bring General Assembly's 'committees and bodies under its control' to 'net zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2030'.
- c) It is **unachievable** to reach net zero 'across the whole of church life' by 2030.
- d) A working distinction should be underlined between General Assembly bodies that are *required to comply*, and associated bodies that General Assembly *encourages to act*, outlined in the 2022 resolution as 'including Trusts, the Retired Ministers, Housing Society, and Resource Centres for Learning, Synods and local churches'.

2. Progress so far

- a) General Assembly committees are identifying and planning the necessary actions they need to take. There are varied understandings of the need for in-person (face-to-face) meetings, though there is already widespread use of internet platforms.
- b) In response to feedback from the committees and others, supporting advice is being drafted in the areas of:

- buildings and other premises (guidelines for adapting buildings are soon to be available).
 - transport (reduction, low-carbon means and reduced alternatives)
 - venues (checklist to support selecting carbon-conscious settings).
- c) Most Synods have an appropriate environmental policy. Synod Property Officers and Green Apostles have commented helpfully on the document 'Net Zero 2030 Buildings Guidance', which will soon be available.
- d) Local churches vary between those which have qualified as Gold Award Eco Churches (Scotland: Eco Congregations) and those that feel they simply do not have the capacity to make meaningful cuts in their carbon footprint. Eco Church/Congregation is now a major movement in British churches, and about a third of URC congregations are either already signed up or have expressed an intention to do so. Becoming an Eco Church/Congregation does not involve a commitment to net zero as such. NZTG see this as an important first step for congregations to begin their journey in a manageable way. Net zero can understandably seem an impossible goal for many local churches. Better to start positively than discard the aim as too overwhelming to contemplate.
- e) NZTG has produced a statement on the key and contentious matter of carbon offsetting, and offers it in appendix i to this paper as a potential resource for the denomination.
- f) Action towards net zero requires clarity. To help reduce confusion in discussions and documents, a paper providing definitions of terms as NZTG uses them is offered (see appendix ii).
- g) Information and advice is currently somewhat dispersed, and a one-stop approach is being developed for the URC website to support all parts of the church in taking action.
- h) Central trusts and other associated bodies have not yet been asked to provide information. However, the URC Trust is represented on NZTG, and some initial conversations have begun.

3. Challenges

- a) Finance presents the greatest challenge. The willingness to act far exceeds the capacity of available funds, whether that be at local, Synod or central level. For example, no Synod could enable all their existing local church buildings, manses and transport arrangements to reach minimal emissions. Church building closures may ease this to a degree. NZTG has scarcely begun to assess the impact of the funding shortfall. It is clear though that, to achieve net zero, a massive rationalisation of buildings would be required. The likely scale of disposal of buildings necessary would present the denomination with a substantial pastoral challenge, as it would call for a rediscovery of local church identity and operation that is free of ties to buildings that cannot affordably be adapted. Some local churches are showing capacity for radical action; some have the opportunity to explore ecumenical partnerships to reduce the number of premises in a community; and some could utilise more net-zero-friendly buildings in their community. The massive challenge presented by our buildings may be an opportunity to rediscover that being a church does not require the ownership of a

physical building. However, some buildings are strategically important for mission, and a focus on funding these is worth exploring.

- b) Several of our ecumenical partner denominations have been able to assign staff capacity centrally to oversee the push to net zero. This would not suit the structure of the URC, where oversight of buildings is decentralised and local congregations are responsible for the upkeep of church buildings, which are largely held in trust by Synod Trust companies. Nevertheless, ecumenical knowledge, resources and tools already in existence (or being developed) can helpfully be adapted to URC needs. NZTG has agreed a working partnership with the Methodists in which each denomination has a representative sitting on each other's environmental working group.
- c) The Environmental Policy agreed by the 2022 General Assembly included a section on 'travel and transport'. We question whether the denomination has taken sufficiently serious note of the request 'to offer incentives to use lower carbon modes of transport'. Some of our ecumenical partners, for example, no longer pay expenses for car travel to meetings, unless there has been prior authorisation. Equally, the URC Environmental Policy makes clear that 'within Europe, the default option should now be to travel by train, unless there is compelling reason not to do so'. With scarcely more than five years to go before 2030, it is valid to ask whether we are genuinely making every effort to adhere to the travel rubric laid out in the 2022 Environmental Policy.
- d) We all recognise the pressures on local churches and Synods, with a widespread picture of dwindling congregations and lack of volunteers. It is easy to see how the enormity of the task and the lack of resource mean that, for some local churches and Synods, it can feel that they simply do not have the capacity to give the reduction of their carbon footprint the priority they would wish. The emphasis in this paper is to encourage Synods and local churches to take even the smallest steps, rather than being overawed by the headline aim of net zero. With this in mind, we ask General Assembly to support the resolution requesting that each URC Synod and related Trust company review its progress on carbon reduction annually, and then provides a summary report of their actions to the Net Zero Task Group.

4. Opportunities for further action

- a) Encouraging church members to consider their own net zero opportunities could have a more immediate impact than a focus on buildings. The combined emissions impact of our daily lives is potentially greater than that created by church premises. Developing such discipleship would call for a serious step change.
- b) Net zero means decarbonising all our uses of energy, replacing fossil fuels with green energy. This can involve major refits (eg of boilers) for premises, but it can be a planned process and the guidance document mentioned above offers advice on this. A simple first step is to switch to green energy suppliers.
- c) 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 (recognising that data centres use significant energy). We note that considerable changes have already been made in this area post-pandemic. The Education and Learning Committee has developed a spreadsheet to optimise journeys. This tool can be adapted for use across the church, and will soon be made available.

- d) Children and young people will live the whole of their lives with the impacts of our carbon and other greenhouse emissions. Across church life, we need to be intentional about hearing their wisdom, insights, concerns and hopes. Young people have leadership to offer that is essential to the whole church moving towards a better and prophetic response to the climate crisis.

5. Conclusion

We are grateful to members of NZTG who have met faithfully each month trying to grapple with the task given to them by the 2022 General Assembly. Without any budget or resource, they have valiantly attempted to make progress in terms of the denomination's aim of reaching net zero by 2030. As will be seen from this report, for some areas this ambition remains a possibility, but there are significant areas, particularly in terms of our buildings, where the 2030 goal is simply unachievable. However, this should not deflect us from making every effort to reduce our carbon footprint across the whole of the church wherever possible.

Appendix one

NZTG Statement on Carbon Offsetting 2023

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**, and 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.

Appendix two

NZTG definitions

The Net Zero Task Group was established by Resolution 17 of General Assembly 2022, which aims to reach net zero emissions of greenhouse gasses by 2030 “across the whole of church life.” It instructs the committees and bodies under its control to form and implement plans to achieve net zero by 2030 and encourages all other elements of the URC to put into practice the Environmental Policy (Paper 12, General Assembly 2022).

As the meanings of much-used words and phrases can become blurred, we thought we’d clarify how we understand and use some key terms.

Net Zero

Cutting greenhouse gas emissions created by our activities to as close to zero as possible, with any remaining emissions assessed and the equivalent a) offset by generating and selling green electricity, b) re-absorbed from the atmosphere or c) offset using verified offset schemes. The intention is to avoid adding to the climate problems resulting from emissions.

God’s image

Includes that humanity is created, equipped and called to function within creation in partnership with God. God’s creation is not ours, but we are invited to enjoy it with God and each other, and to be God’s co-workers in its care. This is a key aspect of loving God and neighbour, and is the foundational mission given humanity “in the beginning.”

Climate change

The climate has always changed, but very slowly, giving people and all life time to adapt. The problem is the speed of climate change caused by the scale of some human activities, and the effects of the resultant extreme weather.

Carbon neutral

A balance between emitting carbon and generating and selling green electricity, absorbing or ‘capturing’ it from the atmosphere.

Carbon sequestration (carbon capture)

Removing carbon from the atmosphere and storing it.

Greenhouse gas emissions

Loading the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and other gases that trap heat, leading to global warming.

Offsetting

Compensating for carbon dioxide emissions arising from human activity (e.g. church activities) by enabling an equivalent amount of carbon to be absorbed from the atmosphere. Plants grow by taking up carbon from the air, and many offsetting schemes work with this. See our ‘Statement on Offsetting.’

Church activities

Worship gatherings, mission action, pastoral action, administration, meetings, etc, whether of a local congregation or any aspect of the wider church, all create emissions and so contribute to climate change.

Green energy

Power (probably electricity) that is sourced renewably, such as from sunlight, wind or water, and that can be produced and provided with minimal emissions. This contrasts with energy produced from fossil fuels (such as oil, gas, coal).