

Mission Committee

Report to General Assembly 2020

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	Bernie Collins: bernie.collins@thecrocker.net Francis Brienens: francis.brienens@urc.org.uk
Action required	For information and discussion
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	This report provides an overview of the work of the Mission Committee and Mission Team in the period from July 2018 to March 2020. It describes completed and ongoing work.
Main points	A progress report is given on the work of: Church and Society, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Global and Intercultural Ministries (including Commitment for Life), Mission and Evangelism, Fresh Expressions and Rural Mission.
Previous relevant documents	Mission committee report to General Assembly 2018. General Assembly 2016: Resolutions 37 and 50.
Consultation has taken place with...	

Summary of Impact

Financial	
External (e.g. ecumenical)	

The central task of the **Mission Committee** is to focus on mission, working with the whole of the church to formulate and give expression to our mission and faith in ways which bring alive our vision of 'being Christ's people, transformed by the Gospel, making a difference to the world' (General Assembly, 2007). The committee seeks to encourage growth in discipleship, evangelism and witness by:

- reflecting on the church's mission practice and theology;
- formulating policy, strategies and programme (action) priorities;
- reading the signs of the times and speaking prophetically;
- working with partners; and
- continuously evaluating the place of mission and evangelism within the work of General Assembly.

Committee members

Convenor: Bernie Collins

Staff: Francis Brienen (Deputy General Secretary – Mission), Philip Brooks (Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations), Elizabeth Clark (National Rural Officer), Karen Campbell (Global and Intercultural Ministries), Kevin Snyman (Global Justice and Partnerships including Commitment for Life), Simeon Mitchell (Church and Society), Linda Rayner (Fresh Expressions)

Members: Sue Fender (Northern), Angela Bogg (North Western), Hilary Smith (Mersey), vacant (Yorkshire), Robert Bushby (East Midlands), John Davey (West Midlands), Lindsey Brown (Eastern), Robert Jordan (South Western), Ray Stanyon (Wessex), Simon Fairnington (Thames North), Alex Mabbs (Southern), Branwen Rees (Wales), John Collings (Scotland)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The days after Easter, when the introduction for this report is written, highlights **resurrection** as the start and goal of Christian mission and the life to live by, following the Great Commission and fulfilling the Lord's Prayer. Also at this time, while prevented by coronavirus restrictions from gathering, churches are finding new ways to worship with each other and serve their communities, and people are having to rethink what is essential and how to reorganise life in the future. The context and opportunities for mission as we go forward could be very different.
- 1.2 So as you read our mission staff reports and reflections on their past two years' work, you are invited to look out for major themes which you think could helpfully be implemented in your local situations, or adapted for changing circumstances; and look out for pieces of work you would like to see developed further on your behalf across your region, or nationally or internationally; and think what you could do to help make these things happen.
- 1.3 You may find encouragement in some words from Tom Wright:

'Christian hope, rooted in Jesus' resurrection, is the hope for God's renewal of all things, for his overcoming of corruption, decay and death, for his filling of the whole cosmos with his love and grace, his power and glory. ... Think through the hope that is ours in the gospel; recognise the renewal of creation as both the goal of all things in Christ and the achievement that has already been accomplished in the resurrection; and go to the work of justice, beauty, evangelism, the renewal of space, time and matter, as the anticipation of the eventual goal and the implementation of what Jesus achieved in his death and resurrection.'

Surprised by Hope (SPCK 2007 p.282)

2. Church and Society

- 2.1 The church and society programme helps the Church to speak prophetically about justice and peace issues in the public square, and supports local churches by providing resources and campaigns that help individuals make the links between faith, politics and social action. Most of this work is carried out through membership of the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT), a partnership between the

United Reformed Church, the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Church of Scotland. Since March 2019, Simeon Mitchell, Secretary for Church and Society, has served as deputy team leader of JPIT.



2.2 Over the last two years, JPIT's work has been focused around helping the Church to work, witness and pray for:

- A society where the poorest and most marginalised are at the centre
- A society that welcomes the stranger
- A just economy that enables the flourishing of all life
- A planet where the environment is renewed
- A world which actively works for peace
- A politics characterised by listening, kindness and truthfulness.

Political engagement

2.3 In October 2018 we launched the **Meet your MP** initiative in England and Wales, which encourages local churches to build a positive relationship with their MP through inviting them to a meeting or event. We have been inspired by learning of how some congregations have engaged with their elected representatives, and hope to see many more getting involved in the future.

2.4 Resources were produced to enable church members to engage with the December 2019 **General Election** in an informed way, under the theme 'Love, Pray, Vote'. A briefing also helped church members to explore some of the issues raised by the May 2019 European Parliamentary Elections.



1: A delegation of church leaders, including the URC's Nigel Uden, meeting Fabian Hamilton MP, shadow minister for peace and disarmament, at the Labour Party Conference in September 2019

- 2.5 Each autumn, our General Assembly Moderators and other URC representatives have attended **political party conferences** as part of the free church leaders' delegation. The representatives attend fringe events and meet with MPs and peers, offering an opportunity to show pastoral support, learn, and discuss issues of concern.
- 2.6 For much of this period, UK politics was dominated by the **Brexit process**, and we offered briefings, reflections and prayers at key moments. During 2019, the URC's General Assembly Moderators also joined with other national church leaders in speaking out about the dangers of a 'no deal' Brexit, because of its potential impact on the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Thousands of church ministers added their names to a letter to the new Prime Minister in July 2019. As Britain departed from the European Union on 31 January 2020, the leaders of the URC, Baptist Union, Methodist Church and Church of Scotland sent an open letter to Churches in EU member states, assuring them that the diminishing of political ties would not affect our commitment to our partnership in the gospel, and our work together around shared values and challenges.

Influencing policy

- 2.7 In this period, there has been a welcome growth in awareness of the urgency of tackling the global **climate crisis**. The Church has been active in encouraging action internationally, domestically, and within our congregations. In May 2019, the URC Mission Council 'urged the UK government to set a target and establish policies to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions in the UK by well before 2050', and a commitment to achieving net zero by 2050 was enshrined in law the following month. A few weeks later, we had a strong and visible URC presence at The Time is Now mass lobby of Parliament, providing the opportunity to meet MPs and call for more ambition and more urgent action.

- 2.8 A major issue of ongoing concern over this period has been **poverty** in Britain, and especially the impact of the rollout of Universal Credit on levels of poverty, debt and hunger. This was a focus for much JPIT policy and advocacy work, and regular blogs and briefings were



2: URC members at 'The Time is Now' climate lobby

produced to help people keep track of changes and continuing challenges. The URC was part of the End Hunger UK campaign, which secured a government commitment to measuring levels of food insecurity amid dramatic rises in foodbank use. We continue to support the call for an end to the five-week initial waiting period for Universal Credit payments. As the coronavirus hit the UK, JPIT played a role in helping church communities mobilise to support the most vulnerable, as well as identifying and highlighting groups which were falling through the gaps of statutory support.

- 2.9 The Church has continued to stand alongside **migrants, refugees and asylum seekers**, challenging ‘hostile environment’ policies and promoting a culture of welcome. The URC has been an active member of the Lift the Ban coalition which is calling for asylum seekers to be given the right to work after six months, and also urged action on refugee family reunion and to limit detention.
- 2.10 JPIT also enabled our Churches collectively to respond to government consultations and proposals on various other issues of longstanding concern, including alcohol and gambling policy, modern slavery, nuclear weapons, and persecution of religious minorities. We have supported efforts to defend the aid budget from attack, and encouraged Britain to fulfil its international commitments responsibly. These activities were supported with media activities, and meetings with MPs, ministers and other policymakers.

Resourcing churches and church members

- 2.11 Various **events** over this period offered church members opportunities to engage with church and society issues. In May 2019, *In the Thick of It*, a 24-hour residential gathering, brought together 54 people engaged in mission and ministry in marginalised places, in a fruitful collaboration with the church-related community work team with funding from the Council for World Mission. In a follow-up to this, we also supported a series of regional events on Speaking Truth to Power organised by Church Action on Poverty. In March 2020, JPIT hosted a major conference for 300 delegates with the timely theme *Renewal and Rebellion: Faith, Economy and Climate*. Keynote speakers included Barry Gardiner MP, economist Katherine Trebeck, Christine Allen of CAFOD, theologian Anthony Reddie, and Green MSP Ross Greer. Church and Society staff also spoke and led workshops on various topics at Synod meetings, training days, network events, Greenbelt, Youth Assembly and local churches.
- 2.12 Alongside the monthly JPIT email newsletter and podcast, regular social media posts and topical blogs, a range of **resource materials** enabled informed discussion, reflection and response to current issues of justice and peace. These included new JPIT briefings on modern slavery, housing, Universal Credit and intergenerational justice, and *Turning the World Upside Down*, a conversation



3: The JPIT conference in March 2020

starter on the economy, the climate crisis and flourishing. During Advent 2019, JPIT hosted *Natwivity*, a retelling of the nativity story on Twitter and Facebook, with content written by URC minister and JPIT poet-in-residence, Lucy Berry. This was accompanied by a series of Advent reflections on justice issues.

- 2.13 A particular focus has been on helping individuals and churches to reflect on what further action they could take in **response to the climate crisis**. In 2019 and 2020, JPIT's Living Lent campaign invited people to make a significant, personal commitment to changing their lifestyle for the environment, such as going meat-free, giving up single-use plastics, or taking up an alternative form of transport, as part of a reflective community during Lent. This generated high levels of interest and participation. In the URC, we encouraged churches and synods to enrol with A Rocha's Eco Church scheme (for England and Wales) or Eco Congregation (in Scotland) and explore how they could reduce their carbon footprints and become more environmentally aware. We did this working in collaboration with the Green Apostles network from the synods and the Assembly environmental task group, and report separately on progress in implementing the URC's environmental commitments.



3. Ecumenical and interfaith relations

- 3.1 The URC is far from unique in combining ecumenical and interfaith relations. Currently, the ecumenical officers for the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union and Salvation Army include interfaith matters as part of their portfolio. In the URC mission department, the ecumenical and interfaith brief is overseen by Philip Brooks as Secretary and Carole Sired as administrator.

Ecumenical relations

- 3.2 The URC works with the ecumenical instruments of England (CTE), Scotland (ACTS) and Wales (Cytûn) as well as with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI). In October 2018, John Bremner was inducted as Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer for the Synod of Scotland. Following on from a report by Theos in 2018, Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) is going through a long period of reorganisation into a new entity called the Scottish Christian Forum. One of its key aims will be to widen its membership. At the end of 2019, we said goodbye to Sally Thomas after her much appreciated service as ecumenical officer for the Synod of Wales. During her time in Wales, Sally also worked closely with Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales).
- 3.3 URC ecumenical relations continue their involvement with the development of the Churches Together in England (CTE) document, *A new Framework for Local Unity in Mission*, now renamed *A Flexible Framework*. This work was described by former CTE General Secretary, David Cornick as 'one of the most significant practical ecumenical documents of our time'. The latest element of this project is to provide a toolkit helping churches to draw up 'lighter touch' ecumenical agreements and so enable a wider range of creative, locally based mission opportunities.

- 3.4 In October 2019, 21 URC ecumenical officers met with Church of England, Methodist, Baptist, Salvation Army, Catholic and CTE colleagues for a 24-hour residential conference entitled *Ecumenism Today*. This gathering of local ecumenical officers was a new initiative and proved an excellent opportunity to discuss and share day-to-day ecumenical issues. A two-day residential conference will now become an annual fixture.
- 3.5 CTE continues to broaden its membership. The URC supported a recent application by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (UK), which brought the number of member churches to 50.
- 3.6 A diverse membership base also brings challenges for an ecumenical instrument. In September 2019, the CTE Enabling Group (formed from one representative for each member church) passed a controversial resolution. A Quaker, Hannah Brock Womack, who is in a same-sex marriage, was asked not to take up her appointed position as fourth president of CTE (there are six presidents in total, each representing a constituency of churches). Whilst accepting that the issue of same-sex marriage is a difficult one, the URC is firm in its commitment that no one in a same-sex relationship should be precluded from holding office. A statement expressing our deep sadness and sense of injustice was issued in the wake of the Enabling Group decision. This remains a live and challenging issue in the ecumenical movement. Within the URC itself, we have been challenged that our statement was not strong enough, whilst others have expressed concern that it fails to respect more conservative theological views. We have pledged to ensure that the conversation continues amongst CTE member churches, taking the view that CTE's present position is discriminatory. The 2020 URC Youth Assembly passed a resolution condemning the decision taken by CTE's Enabling Group. The URC Ecumenical Secretary was given time at the March 2020 Enabling Group to present the URC position. Subsequently, CTE has issued an invitation for a member of URC Youth to join a small planning group, considering ways in which CTE can enable conversations about human sexuality.
- 3.7 One positive experience of the Covid-19 lockdown period was the ecumenical response. National ecumenical officers met on a weekly basis, facilitated by CTE but with active involvement from CTBI, Cytŷn and with the Church of Scotland bringing a Scottish perspective. The sharing of advice and mutual support, together with shining examples of local co-operation, showed ecumenism in action. Amongst several initiatives, the URC's guidance papers on virtual Communion and 'New Normal' were much appreciated by ecumenical colleagues.
- 3.8 A good deal of the URC's ecumenical work at national level operates through bilateral groups, such as the Methodist/URC Liaison Group. There has been a delay in establishing the next round of dialogue with the Church of England, as the appointed Bishop co-chair has moved to another appointment, but the bilateral Contact Group should commence in late 2020. The Roman Catholic/URC Dialogue Group has concentrated on highlighting positive examples of local engagement. A recent residential was held at Christ the Cornerstone, a five-way LEP in Milton Keynes, meeting with the Catholic priest and URC minister serving there, along with members of the congregations. We were able to affirm that Milton Keynes still represents a relevant and effective model of ecumenism. In November 2020, the Dialogue Group has arranged a residential meeting with Catholic and URC members from the ecumenical county of Cumbria.

European ecumenical relations

- 3.9 General Assembly resolution 50 in 2016 committed the URC to 'ongoing ecumenical relationships across Europe'. We have worked hard to maintain and develop our links with European churches. In September 2018, John Bradbury was elected as one of the three presidents of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE).
- 3.10 The URC has long-standing links with the Waldensian Church in Italy, and there is an active URC Waldensian Fellowship Group. Several synods engage with European churches. Wessex Synod has an annual 'Le Weekend' exchange with partner Protestant Church in Northern France, and this year was set to visit Roubaix.
- 3.11 The covenant of table and pulpit fellowship with the Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz (EKP) in Germany was formally established in 1957, although its roots go back to the early post-war years. It links around 40 URC and EKP churches (plus new churches seeking partners). Several important initiatives have taken place in the last two years. A URC delegation travelled to Neustadt for a theological consultation and to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the union of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the Pfalz. The URC and EKP produced a unique resource to mark 100 years since the WWI armistice. In November 2019, a party of 50 from the URC and EKP gathered to celebrate 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. A joint statement produced at the event was heartily endorsed by URC Mission Council and the EKP Landessynode.

Interfaith relations

- 3.12 Following a review, this work is now facilitated by the interfaith enabling group (IEG) with its emphasis on encouraging local interfaith engagement. Tracey Lewis is the new chair of the group. It is encouraging to note close ecumenical co-operation with the Baptist interfaith working group. Most meetings are now held jointly.



URC group visiting IOPT

- 3.13 The IEG oversees the interfaith fund. Some of the initiatives supported include: a local church training day; a climate crisis event hosted by the Muslim Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society and the Synod of Scotland; support for the ecumenical accompaniment programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI); support for the work of the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ); visits to Israel and Palestine by a Muslim-Christian women's group from Yorkshire, and a group visit to the region bringing together members from the Forest Group of URC churches in North London, the South Woodford Mosque and the East London and Essex Liberal Synagogue.
- 3.14 The URC continues to participate in the churches' forum for inter-religious relations (overseen by CTBI) and the interfaith network (IFN). The URC's Ecumenical and Interfaith Secretary recently gave a presentation to IFN's faith communities forum on the theme of relationships and education in the Christian tradition.
- 3.15 Resolution 37 from the 2016 General Assembly mandated Mission Committee 'to enable synods, local churches and individuals to become more aware and to respond with informed prayer, grace and solidarity' to the complex and multi-layered situation in Israel and Palestine. One major resulting initiative was the Israel-Palestine educational visit. Finance for the visit came from central funds, grants, synods and personal fundraising by participants. In September 2019, a group of 22 people spent 10 days in the region, led by Brian Jolly, and with Lawrence Moore providing Bible studies throughout the visit. All 13 synods were represented, as were global and intercultural ministries, Commitment for Life, URC Youth and *Reform*. Derek Estill as General Assembly Moderator and Katie Henderson as Youth Assembly Moderator gave the visit added impetus. The deliberate focus was on meeting with indigenous Christians, who in turn requested their stories to be shared and to encourage others to visit the region. Collectively, the 22 participants have provided more than 100 presentations across local churches and synods. It has been particularly noticeable that congregations are unaware of the lived experience of Christians, particularly in Palestine. A group of participants has written the *Walking the Way* resources for Advent 2018 and Lent 2019. There has also been a series of articles in *Reform*. As a denomination, we now look to see where this learning will lead us in future responses.
- 3.16 The *12 Faces of Hope* exhibition was featured at the 2018 General Assembly. The exhibition offers 12 individual, short narratives sharing their hopes for justice and peace in the Holy Land. Since 2018, the exhibition has been on tour, visiting eight synods, as well as appearing at CTBI's 2019 Annual General Meeting. It has travelled as far afield as Helensburgh in Scotland and Tavistock in Devon. The exhibition is free to borrow (apart from carriage) and remains relevant. It can be booked by emailing carole.sired@urc.org.uk.

4. Global and Intercultural Ministries

- 4.1 Global and Intercultural Ministries (GIM) covers several areas, including global partnerships, intercultural work and Commitment for Life. The global and intercultural team consists of Karen Campbell (Secretary for GIM), Kevin Snyman (Programme Officer for Global Justice and Partnerships), Veronica Daniel (Administrator for GIM) and Suzanne Pearson (Administrator for Commitment for Life). Previous Commitment for Life Programme Co-ordinator Linda Mead retired

from her role in November 2018, while former Secretary for GIM, Michael Jagessar moved to a new post with the Council for World Mission in February 2020. We thank them for their excellent contributions to the life and work of the United Reformed Church.

Council for World Mission

4.2 Much of our global church engagement takes place through the work and programmes of the Council for World Mission. A key area of involvement is the **Partners in Mission** programme, through which we send and receive mission partners.

4.2.1 Alison Gibbs has served in Zambia since 1997. Alison recently moved to Mbereshi in northern Zambia to be head teacher at Mabel Shaw Girls' Secondary School. A request by the United Church of Zambia and the URC to CWM for her term to be extended for one more year beyond her retirement year (2020) is currently being finalised.

4.2.2 In May 2019 the Revd Yufen Chen from the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan arrived in the UK to work with the Taiwanese Fellowship in Lumen (TFiL), London. This is a new phase of mission partnership with the PCT following many years of supporting a Taiwanese chaplain in Manchester. Yufen has settled in well, and is very much engaged in developing this newly focused ministry and mission.



CWM's Wayne Hawkins welcomes the Revd Yufen Chen at Lumen

4.2.3 So-Young Jung from the Presbyterian Church of Korea is lay missionary with the New Malden and Kingston churches in Southern Synod, working in particular with North and South Korean women and young people. After a year on secondment from the PCK, she became a formal partner in mission in March 2020.

4.2.4 We are grateful to the international exchange reference group whose members support the partners in mission work through visits, taking on specific pieces of necessary work and serving on the management or support group of partners in mission in the UK.

4.3 CMW offers a range of **other programmes**, such as the Face to Face programme for ordinands, Training in Mission (for young adults exploring mission) and A New Face (ANF) programme for ministers/CRCWs. Adella Pritchard participated in the ANF Programme in New Zealand in October 2019, with a focus on ministers with disabilities as agents of change in their context.

- 4.4 The URC contributed to CWM's **new international financial and economic architecture programme** (NIFEA) as it works towards a just economics of fullness of life. A final gathering in a series of three consultations took place in Guyana in 2018, and a report and action plan were received by the Mission Committee in February 2019. This resulted in the production of resources on Economy of Life, various network meetings on the role of debt upholding injustice (see 4.9) and a conference co-hosted with CWM on the theme *Forgive us our Debt?* in December 2019.
- 4.5 **The Legacies of Slavery** began as a series of hearings organised by CWM in London, Accra, Kingston and Virginia as a response to the call from black communities of the Caribbean, UK and the US for the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade to be addressed. CWM has asked that member churches deepen their sensitivity to the issue of ongoing and endemic white privilege, and its adverse impact on black people and communities. In response to the report on the Legacies of Slavery hearings, mission committee established a task group to work out how to help the Church to address the issues of apology, reparation/ restorative justice and white privilege. The task group, led by Alan Yates, completed its initial work in September 2019, and a report was brought to Mission Council in November 2019 for discussion. The task group intends to bring concrete proposals to General Assembly in 2021 or 2022, following a process of church-wide conversation.
- 4.6 Various URC representatives continue to play a key part in the **governance** structures of CWM: John Ellis as CWM's Treasurer, John Proctor in CWM's strategic review group, Lindsey Brown at the annual members meeting in Samoa in June 2019. CWM's Assembly due in June 2020 has been postponed to 2021.

Synod global partnerships and networks

- 4.7 Since Assembly 2018, various synod global partnership visits have taken place: from Northern Synod to Mozambique, from East Midlands to Botswana, from West Midlands to North India and from Wessex to Zambia. The Wessex visit focused on the renewal of the partner link and activities for 2020-2024.
- 4.8 Several synods have reviewed their longstanding partnership links: some may seek new partnerships; others have affirmed their partnership and seek to strengthen it, e.g. Eastern Synod with Zimbabwe (Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa) and North Western with the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan.
- 4.9 A first joint meeting of the **synod global and intercultural coordinators**, as well as **Commitment for Life advocates**, took place in October 2018, to reflect how their areas of focus connect and sometimes overlap. The theme of the meeting was *Partnering for Justice*. In attendance were two partners from Zimbabwe during a visit to Eastern Synod. The annual residential gathering of these networks in 2019 focused on the theme *Forgive us our Debts?* as well as on the work related to each network. The 2020 meeting may take place online as a result of the coronavirus crisis.
- 4.10 TeamURC, Cascades of Grace, and **Black and Minority Ethnic Ministers and CRCWs** (BAME) continue to meet. At the 2018 BAME gathering, Anthony Reddie spoke on the impact of Brexit on minority and black communities in the UK. In 2019, we examined the devastating impacts of a debt-based, interest-bearing economic structure, particularly on marginalised communities. We continue to

encourage smaller gatherings focused on racial justice issues across the synods, such as the racial justice gathering held by Thames North Synod at Vine URC focusing on the environment.



BAME gathering 2019

- 4.11 We support and participate in CTBI's **Racial Justice Network** meetings. 2020 will be an opportunity to mark 50 years of Racial Justice Sunday, and we are involved in the advocacy work around this, with events planned in October 2020.

Other global partnerships, visits and engagements

- 4.12 Part of our work is to facilitate visits. For visits that we manage, we encourage briefing and debriefing, wider representation of our membership, and the connecting of issues, concerns and themes is emphasised. We facilitated **representational visits** and participation in **global or regional ecumenical bodies and gatherings**.
- 4.12.1 Representational visits to partner churches and their assemblies included the Presbyterian Church of Korea, the Waldensian Church in Italy, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana and the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, the Spanish Protestant Evangelical Church, the Church of North India, Church of South India, Guyana Congregational Union, Presbyterian Church in Myanmar, Presbyterian Church in Taiwan and the United Church of Zambia.
- 4.12.2 We were represented in meetings of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, the World Communion of Reformed Churches and its European Regional Council, the Central Committee and the Faith and Order Committee of the World Council of Churches, and the Churches

Commission on Migrants in Europe. We also took part in a partners consultation of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, the Taiwan Ecumenical Forum and ongoing ecumenical conversations on peace in the Korean peninsula sponsored by the WCC and the National Council of Churches in Korea.

- 4.13 Our commitment to ensure that **ministers and those training for ministry** have a global exposure has seen visits to partner churches in Zimbabwe (UPCSA), Taiwan (PCT), Jamaica (United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands) and Canada (United Church of Canada).
- 4.14 We have also expressed our global partnership by supporting ongoing **empowerment, development and emergency relief** of partners and their communities. We have contributed towards emergency relief following natural disasters in Indonesia, the Bahamas, Malawi, Australia and Zambia. We have also supported scholarships and church planting work in Myanmar, empowerment of women through theological formation in India, and work among displaced children and young people in Syria and Lebanon. As part of our carbon offsetting scheme, we supported the installation of a biogas plant at the Kerala United Theological Seminary in India.

Resourcing and policy work

- 4.15 **Resourcing local congregations** forms a key part of our work. A wide range of resources has been produced in the past two years, including a film to mark Windrush at 70 (*Longing to Belong*) with accompanying worship materials. We also produced materials for Racial Justice Sunday in 2018, 2019 and 2020, and leaflets on Partnership and Portraying Diversity. For a full range of our resources, please visit the GIM pages on the URC website.
- 4.16 The matter of the URC's carbon footprint through global travel has been raised on several occasions. Over the last two years, we have put in place a more robust **travel policy** for all international travel related to our work. The policy includes managing sensible and necessary representational travels, encouraging good stewardship of time and gifts, using airlines that are committed to the need for sustainability, deploying virtual meeting mechanisms for short gatherings, and balancing the need for engagement 'on site' with the challenge of the Church's carbon footprint in the context of a multiple set of environmental realities and challenges.



NIFEA Guyana participants

Commitment for Life

- 4.17 Commitment for Life is the distinctive global justice programme of the URC. We have partnered with Christian Aid and Global Justice Now since 1992, having grown out of the 1% appeal. Following a review of the programme, Mission Committee affirmed the work of Commitment for Life as part of the mission of the United Reformed Church for justice in God's world, and recognised that the added value of worship, education and action by Commitment for Life are still important and relevant today. However, it also recognised that, in the light of the present global economic and political climate, there was a need for the programme to develop and reignite a passion for justice through new technology, engagement of a new generation of people, and the creation of a new relationship with Christian Aid and Global Justice Now to suit their changing working model. In the past two years, much of this work has been undertaken.
- 4.18 When the programme's coordinator retired in 2018, Kevin Snyman was appointed under the new job title of Programme Officer for Global Justice and Partnerships to reflect the decision to **integrate Commitment for Life programme into global and intercultural ministries**. This has sharpened Commitment for Life's *raison d'être* as the denomination's shared global justice programme, and has made communicating the purpose of Commitment for Life easier.
- 4.19 **Partner regions** include Bangladesh, Central America (Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua), Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories (IOPT) and Zimbabwe. All continue to struggle with environmental and political concerns that affect those living with poverty. Christian Aid partners in Bangladesh are focusing on resilience, climate change, inclusion, and market and humanitarian responses. The Central American team focuses on political transparency, gender violence, inclusive markets, and resilience in the face of climate change. Conditions in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories continue to deteriorate. Advocacy is fundamental to our work in IOPT in support for the rights of all Palestinians and Israelis to live safely and securely. Political instability in Zimbabwe still besets ordinary people, but we focus on household resilience, strengthening livelihoods and engage in advocacy work on gender empowerment.
- 4.20 The new programme staff have worked hard to strengthen links with **Christian Aid**. Christian Aid has undergone a major overhaul, affecting many aspects of its work. This was necessitated by the changing ratio between unrestricted and restricted funding, with the former seeing significant declines over recent years. Christian Aid has withdrawn from two of Commitment for Life's partner countries in Central America, El Salvador and Guatemala. This has prompted us to ask our congregations who have supported Central America and other stakeholders whether to recommend that Commitment for Life limits its support to only three regions, or find another region to support.
- 4.21 In consultation with Mission Committee and the URC communications department, Commitment for Life updated its **presentation and look**, in line with the new-look URC logo. The response has been very positive. The new logos have been used in resources, posters, giving-boxes, communications and films. Updated resources have been in great demand, with more than 1,500 recycled plastic, one-pound trolley keyrings already shared. Suzanne Pearson has worked hard to improve the response time to queries and requests for resources from congregations.

- 4.22 Commitment for Life continues to support the **Stop Climate Chaos Coalition**. We are an associate of the **Jubilee Debt Campaign** and remain a stakeholder for the **Fairtrade Foundation**. **Global Justice Now** continues its vital role in highlighting those injustices that affect us all. These include reporting on the negotiation in secret of deeply unjust trade agreements that impoverish everyone except the already extremely wealthy in societies. Our partners rely and plan on the prayers, activism and contributions made by the more than 400 local churches who are active in Commitment for Life.
- 4.23 A strong focus of education is a priority for the 22 members of the URC's 2019 educational visit to **Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories**. A number of these members have undertaken to advocate for Commitment for Life, with a particular focus on IOPT. They have emphasised learning, listening, praying and working for justice in that region. Their impact is already being felt by Commitment for Life and across the denomination.
- 4.24 The programme is supported by a reference group and by a network of synod advocates. The reference group has made it clear that the fundamental basis of support by congregations should be clearly articulated as a list of priorities: prayer, learning, action/advocacy and sharing. Given the enormity of the social justice issues facing our partner regions, prayer must always come first, followed by learning about the situation faced by our partner regions, particularly as this pertains to justice and environmental disruption, followed by advocacy/action on behalf of our partners, and only then sharing and giving.
- 4.25 Commitment for Life has seen a steady decline in giving over the past few years. The 2017 review identified a number of factors for this, including the current economic and political situation, changing attitudes to charity giving, confusion over the difference between Commitment for Life and Christian Aid, the average age and number of members and congregations, to name but a few. In the past two years, we have tried to address the recommendations of the review, and we are encouraged by a small upturn in giving in 2019.

5. Mission and evangelism

- 5.1 Supporting local churches and synods in their engagement with God's mission, especially in sharing the good news and reaching out to the community, is a key part of our work, and in the mission department this is supported by the Deputy General Secretary (Mission), Francis Brienen, and administrator Carole Sired.

Vision2020

- 5.2 Vision2020 reached its final year in 2020, and an evaluation of the framework for mission is currently taking place. While it had been the intention to bring a report to the General Assembly in 2020, in the light of the potential cancellation of Assembly this has been deferred to no later than Assembly 2021. This will allow us to gather more data, including the results of the annual church returns of 2019.
- 5.3 The vision2020 grants funding continues to be well used. Since July 2018, more than 20 grants were given, providing funding for youth work, children and family outreach, social justice campaigns, messy church, debt counselling and skills development for volunteers etc. The grants continue to enable local churches to reach out to their communities in innovative and creative ways.

Walking the Way, living the life of Jesus today

5.4 Mission staff are fully involved in the support and development of *Walking the Way, living the life of Jesus today*, the URC's long-term emphasis on missional discipleship. The project manager is part of the mission team at Church House, and the Deputy General Secretary (Mission) co-convenes the steering group. For an overview of how Walking the Way is developing, please see its pages in this *Book of Reports* (the next report but one after this one).

Projects and partners

5.5 The November 2018 Mission Council agreed to fund the URC's presence at **Greenbelt** for a further period of three years under the oversight of Mission Committee. The findings of a review of the URC/Greenbelt partnership noted that 30% of the 12,000 non-URC visitors at Greenbelt were more aware of the URC since attending the festival, and saw the denomination in a good light as a result. The review also found that 50% of URC members at Greenbelt said the partnership had a positive impact on local churches.

5.5.1 Greenbelt 2019 represented the first URC presence of the revised funding stream. It was staffed by an enthusiastic team of 28 volunteers and eight youth ambassadors. As always, the URC tent demonstrated admirable creativity, responding to the general Greenbelt theme and giving it a URC twist. The result was *Walking the Way with wit and wisdom*. The URC at Greenbelt presence includes members of local churches who will never attend the festival. Local churches from as far afield as Southampton and Fraserburgh sent in their wit and wisdom sayings, which were displayed in the tent and then given away to festival goers on the final day of the event.



URC tent at Greenbelt

- 5.5.2 It is a blow that the festival has been furloughed for 2020. However, the theme of *Revolting Christians* will carry forward to 2021. The way in which we invite contributions from local churches across the UK gives us more opportunity to offer an even more impressive presence next year. So we ask that churches continue to send in their stories of inspirational people, together with the Wanted posters. One aim for 2021 will be to encourage more URC church groups to visit the festival. Visit the Greenbelt section of the URC website for more details.
- 5.6 In addition to projects which support local mission, we also partner with other organisations to resource local churches. One such partner is **HOPE**, which designated 2018 as a special year of mission. A thousand areas/churches engaged with HOPE in 2018 through distributing the Easter, Summer and Christmas magazines, through engaging with the Talking Jesus material or in direct mission activity. The HOPE work continued in 2019 as a year of prayer and planning for 2020, the year of hope-filled presentation of the gospel under the banner of Advance2020.
- 5.7 An increasing number of local United Reformed churches participate in **Thy Kingdom Come**, the global prayer movement that originated from the initiative of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 2016. The Mission Committee is in the process of seeking a more active partnership with TKC so that this can be supported and promoted more widely throughout the URC.
- 5.8 The **Christian Enquiry Agency**, which works on behalf of the churches, including the URC, launched a new website in February 2020. The website is an excellent resource for people who are enquiring about the Christian faith (www.christianity.org.uk). It is also particularly useful for smaller churches without their own online presence.

Networks

- 5.9 Mission staff support the mission enablers, working in the synods, by facilitating regular meetings for sharing and support. Autumn residentials took place in 2018 and 2019 offering an opportunity to share developments in the synods, learn more about chosen themes, discuss the synods' engagement with Walking the Way and Stepwise, and synod and local involvement in Fresh Expressions.

Fresh Expressions

- 5.10 The ecumenical **Fresh Expressions board**, of which the URC has been a part, came to an end in October 2019, at the end of its third quinquennium. The new board that was formed is smaller, light-touch, and gift-based rather than representational. The URC continued its involvement in Fresh Expressions Networks (as it is now called) through the newly formed denominational leaders hub, the pioneer development hub, the denominational partners learning community and the FX gatherings. We will remain connected with all our ecumenical partners in this way and at the same time focus our energies on embedding fresh expressions thinking and practice in the life of the URC.



First FX Gathering at Westminster College

- 5.11 In order to do so, the Mission Committee set up a **Fresh Expressions enabling group**. The group brings together representatives from mission, education and learning, ministries, children and youth work, synod moderators, faith and order and the pioneers network. The intention is to enable every part of the URC to understand and embrace the importance of fresh expressions alongside more traditional forms of church in the future. Both new and inherited forms of church are important.
- 5.12 The URC pioneer ministers comprise special category ministry (SCM) posts, and synod-employed posts. Some are ecumenical. The **pioneers** are all ministers of Word and Sacraments, though not necessarily ordained into the URC. Since the last Assembly, mission staff have facilitated several meetings of these pioneer ministers to share experiences and explore challenges. Representatives from the Faith and Order committee attended the pioneers' most recent residential to research the present and future position of pioneering in the Church as they grapple with questions of ecclesiology, calling and ordination and prepare for further discussion around fresh expressions.
- 5.13 The URC also has many 'unofficial' pioneers, including lay and ordained, employed and volunteers. A **learning community-style of gathering** for these pioneers was introduced early in 2020 (with a plan for similar in future years) by Westminster College in collaboration with the URC mission department. The Gathering (as it is called) comprises three 24-hour meetings in the year, and is encouraging leaders of Fresh Expressions to network together, learn from each other, share stories and plan their future moves for bringing their members closer to God. A key part of the meetings is working with the new FX Godsend app which provides ideas and inspiration for anyone embarking on pioneering a new form of church. This year, 11 projects are represented with 22 participants, and feedback after the initial meeting has been positive. Future meetings are planned for July and October 2020.

- 5.14 The Coordinator for Fresh Expressions, Linda Rayner, continues to work closely with synod mission enablers, training officers and other synod networks, offering training for trainers as the Fresh Expressions ethos is cascaded through the Church. She also works with the team developing Stepwise to produce part of the faith-filled community module. Mission Shaped Ministry (MSM) and Mission Shaped Intro (MSI) courses continue to be available, although some of this is now superseded by the Godsend app.

Rural Mission

- 5.15 Rural churches can make a huge difference to their communities. The work of the National Rural Officer, a post shared with the Methodist Church, is aimed at supporting and promoting small rural churches as they engage in mission. The NRO post is held by Elizabeth Clark, who is based at the Arthur Rank Centre (ARC) in Stoneleigh Park, Kenilworth.
- 5.16 It is estimated that around 25% of URCs are rural. Whilst **rural churches** are in the minority, it is important that we all have some understanding of the context where many of our colleagues, members and friends live and minister. Currently one of the biggest challenges is that of flooding, with many villages and countless hectares of farmland under water. The effects are terrible for everyone, but for some farmers any chance of growing a crop this year has disappeared, and this could have catastrophic effects on their business. Please hold them in your prayers.
- 5.17 The Rural Officer was invited to an evidence session of the Stepwise task and finish group to talk about how the rural context might affect the development and delivery of Stepwise. A serious concern is online accessibility in rural areas. Almost 12% of rural households are unable to access 10Mb/s broadband. (House of Lords, 2019). There is also a need to try and develop groups that minimise travel, since public transport can be scarce or non-existent.



Worship toolkit for rural churches

- 5.18 The rural strategy group, which supports the work of the NRO, discussed the issues around providing accredited preachers to lead worship in rural areas. This is a challenge that affects all denominations. Providing a service at a regular time each week can make it easier for new people to join in. Worship is key to who we are, and many rural Christians value worshipping in their local communities. The fellowship and sense of community that belonging to church can give is also important in rural communities, where loneliness and isolation can be an issue. This discussion led to the writing of a resource called *Worshipping Together*. This aims to give congregations the confidence to lead their own worship.
- 5.19 Rural Mission Sunday is in its sixth year and continues to grow. This year Rural Mission Sunday falls on 19 July, and the theme is *Common Ground*. It provides an opportunity for rural churches to celebrate who they are and encouragement to do this with their communities. Given the increasing divisions in society, this theme felt timely.
- 5.20 The National Rural Officer is due to retire in August 2021, and a review of the post was started in September 2019. In the course of the review, it became clear that as part of a new strategy for evangelism and growth, *God for All*, the Methodist Church would wish to employ a full-time rural officer from August 2021. This in effect means the end of a shared post between the two denominations. Conversations and exploration are now taking place to see what the implications are for the URC, for the role of the rural strategy group and for future ecumenical co-operation in the area of rural ministry and mission.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Bernie Collins, outgoing convenor, writes: 'My thanks to the whole mission staff team, to all core members of the committee representing synods during my four-year term, and others with particular responsibilities. Thanks for sharing and learning from each other's experience, leadership and insights into God's work. And our gratitude to people in local churches, synods, other Assembly departments and ecumenical partnerships, members of the body of Christ at work in his mission. Please forgive anything done unhelpfully or inappropriately, and pray for God's guidance and grace for work to go ahead well with the new convenor, Sarah Lane Cawte.'