

Paper I1

Report to General Assembly 2021

Mission Committee

Basic information

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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 2020 till April 2021. 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 2020. Mission Council 11/20: Papers G1 and G2 Mission Council 03/21: Paper I1
Consultation has taken place with...	

Summary of impact

Financial	
External (e.g. ecumenical)	

Report to General Assembly

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
- continuously evaluating the place of mission and evangelism within the work of General Assembly.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on everyone's life in the last year. Inevitably, it has affected the work of local churches and of the Mission Committee. The Mission Committee has held its meetings online. Whilst this took some adjustment initially, it has had benefits in focusing time and energy, and we expect to continue to connect in this way for at least some of our future meetings. Some events and projects have had to be set aside, at least temporarily, but a new creativity has emerged. People have been able to connect with others in meaningful ways, taking advantage of the technology to which many have access, and forums such as webinars have helped the Mission Team to engage church members with some of the important issues with which they are working.
- 1.2. The Mission Committee report offers an overview of each area for which the committee is responsible, and of the work of the staff members responsible for the work. Members of the Committee are listed in the Nominations Committee report.

2. Church and Society

Secretary for Church and Society: Simeon Mitchell

Programme Support Officer for Church and Society: Roo Stewart

- 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, and the Baptist Union of Great Britain, with the Church of Scotland as associate partners.



- 2.2 In April 2021, Simeon Mitchell, Secretary for Church and Society, was appointed interim Team Leader of JPIT for a period of two years, having previously been Deputy Team Leader.

- 2.3 In recent years, JPIT has been focused on 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.

In 2020 / 21, the work was organised around five priorities:

Staying alert to justice

- 2.4 In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, we raised awareness of how different people, groups and situations were being adversely affected by the crisis. As well as highlighting issues through the daily 'Stay and Pray' initiative, we advocated for action for those who fell through the gaps in support, such as migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds, and children in poverty missing out on free school meals.
- 2.5 A series of blogs explored aspects of racial justice, and a season of films and stories focused on people's lived experience of homelessness. We also offered a briefing and webinar about the changing landscape of winter provision for the homeless.
- 2.6 Looking internationally, the General Assembly Moderators backed the People's Vaccine campaign for equitable global access to Covid-19 vaccines, and a call for the cancellation of some of the poorest countries' debts in the light of the pandemic. An emergency resolution was passed by the November 2020 Mission Council objecting to cuts in the UK's commitment to devote 0.7% of national income to addressing global poverty, and joint briefing and advocacy work was undertaken on this issue with ecumenical partners.

Reset the debt

- 2.7 Research that JPIT had carried out into poverty under lockdown identified the build-up of unavoidable debt by low-income households as a major impending problem which was not being addressed by others. In October 2020, the 'Reset the Debt' campaign was launched with a research report and national media coverage, to put a spotlight on this crisis and make the case for debt forgiveness – jubilee – to be part of the solution. Thousands of people have supported the campaign in some way, and we continue to work with Church Action on Poverty and the Jubilee Debt Campaign to build support in parliament and with the public for action on this issue.

Climate justice

- 2.8 With the UN COP climate summit due to be held in November 2021 in Glasgow, this year offers a major opportunity for action on the climate emergency – locally, nationally and internationally. At a policy level, the General Assembly Moderators were invited to meet with the COP President, and signed letters calling for ambitious emissions reduction commitments and for global justice to be at the heart of future agreements.

- 2.9 Climate Sunday was launched as a significant ecumenical initiative resourcing local churches to engage with COP26, and the URC provided financial support and commended its resources and calls to action.
- 2.10 Within the URC, this year saw the West Midlands Synod achieve the first Eco Synod award in March 2021, and continuing growth in the numbers of churches engaging with environmental issues through Eco Church (England and Wales) and Eco-Congregation (Scotland), encouraged by a network of Green Apostles. Mission Council also passed a resolution urging people to work towards eliminating the use of single-use plastics, given their significant environmental impact.

From recovery to flourishing

- 2.11 As the economy entered a recession and attention focused on the need for an economic recovery, the Churches developed a statement setting out our hopes for an economy that enables flourishing for both people and planet. We highlighted initiatives and events from partners around these themes, including the Fairtrade Foundation and the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (ECCR), and supported the launch of Church Action for Tax Justice's Fair Tax Now campaign in January 2021.

Welcoming the stranger

- 2.12 The Church has continued to stand alongside migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, challenging 'hostile environment' policies and promoting a culture of welcome. We responded to the government's proposals for reform of the asylum system, and continued to call for an end to indefinite detention, the establishment of safe routes for unaccompanied child refugees to come to the UK from elsewhere in Europe, and for asylum seekers to be allowed to work. Church leaders joined in widespread condemnation of the use of former barracks as accommodation for asylum seekers. We raised concerns about the operation of the settled status scheme for EU citizens living in the UK, and launched an information campaign to raise awareness of the scheme through churches and highlight sources of support for vulnerable groups in applying.

Responding and resourcing

- 2.13 In addition to work around these priorities, JPIT also enabled our Churches collectively to respond to government consultations and proposals on various other issues of longstanding concern, including gambling, defence and security policy, the role of faith groups, welfare provision, and nuclear weapons. We celebrated the passing into international law of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons with a statement and video from faith leaders, and encouraged banks and pension funds to reconsider their investments.
- 2.14 A range of resource materials were produced to enable informed discussion, reflection and response to current issues of justice and peace. Alongside the monthly JPIT email newsletter and podcast, regular social media posts and topical blogs, these included briefings on Brexit and the May 2021 elections, Advent worship resources, group study materials on 'How Does Change Happen?', and 'Politics in the Pulpit', a new weekly lectionary-based video podcast. All can be found at the JPIT website: www.jointpublicissues.org.uk.

3. Ecumenical and interfaith relations

Secretary for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations: Philip Brooks

Administrator: Carole Sired

Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer for the National Synod of Scotland:

John Bremner

Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer for the National Synod of Wales: Martin Spain
(from June 2021)

Ecumenical relations

- 3.1 The URC works with the ecumenical instruments of England (Churches Together in England, CTE) and Wales (Cytûn), as well as with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI).
- 3.2 A long period of reorganisation, which will result in the Scottish ecumenical instrument transforming from Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) to a more inclusive way for Scottish churches to work together ecumenically, is nearing fruition. Named the Scottish Christian Forum, the new organisation's aim is to significantly widen its membership base. In the transition period, the Scottish Church Leaders Forum has been working very effectively, particularly in its engagement with the Scottish Government during the period of the pandemic.
- 3.3 At the end of 2020, CTE consulted its members on their new strategic plan document, to which the URC Mission Committee provided extensive feedback.
- 3.4 At the meeting of CTE's Enabling Group in October, Victoria Turner (URC Youth) was elected a CTE trustee. Victoria is also part of CTE's working group responding to the issue, recorded in the 2018 Book of Reports, concerning Quaker, Hannah Brock Womack, who is still not able to take up her appointed position as CTE fourth president, because of her same-sex marriage.
- 3.5 During the lockdown period the URC, Church of England, Baptist and Methodist national ecumenical officers (NEOs) developed a toolkit as the companion document to 'A flexible framework for local unity in mission'. It is a practical guide to lighter touch ways of ecumenical working. The URC Communications department provided the design for this booklet.
- 3.6 During the first half of 2021, the NEOs and CTE have been engaging in Zoom consultations with regional church leaders to consider the future of intermediate ecumenism (often referred to as 'county bodies'). Several URC Synod Moderators and Ecumenical Officers have taken part in these 'virtual roadshows'. The organising group is due to draft a report of its findings and recommendations by the end of 2021.
- 3.7 After several years of research, the Free Churches Group (FCG) has published its report, 'The Church and Social Cohesion', produced in partnership with the Theos thinktank. It looks at the churches' grass roots contribution to social cohesion, offering practical recommendations for how churches can maximise their potential to foster social cohesion in the community. Helen Cameron, Chair of the Northampton Methodist District, has been elected as FCG Moderator-Elect. She will work alongside the current Moderator, Hugh Osgood, and take over from him in April 2022.

- 3.8 In November 2020, the international Reformed-Anglican Dialogue published a major report on its work: 'Koinonia: God's Gift and Calling'. The report was received enthusiastically by the URC's Faith and Order Committee. There are plans for a theological consultation led by the URC, Church of England and CTE to take place later in 2021.
- 3.9 The URC continues to take part in several bilateral groups, as well as acting in an observer capacity at the Methodist Anglican Panel for Unity in Mission and the Church of England Council for Christian Unity.
- 3.10 In 2020, Paul Whittle took over a caretaker role as co-convenor of the Methodist / URC Liaison Group. Geoffrey Clarke is nominated at this General Assembly to serve as co-convenor for the next five years.
- 3.11 As recorded in last year's Book of Reports, we continue to be thwarted in establishing the next round of dialogue between the URC and the Church of England, because our Anglican colleagues have been unable to find a co-convenor. Separately, two bishops were lined up to take on this role, but for different reasons, each of them had to withdraw.
- 3.12 The third phase of dialogue between the URC and the Roman Catholic Church has continued its momentum, transferring recent meetings to Zoom. Its co-convenors are John Bradbury and Bishop Paul Hendricks. Our postponed residential in Carlisle, looking at the relationship between covenant partners and companion churches in the ecumenical county of Cumbria, will hopefully take place in November 2021.
- 3.13 We are grateful to those who attend ecumenical assemblies representing the URC. Notable amongst these is Tim Meadows, who is the URC observer at the regular Church of England Synod meetings. Roy Fowler is retiring after several years representing the URC at Methodist Conference, and in 2021 Peter Pay took on this commitment.

European ecumenical relations

- 3.14 Despite the inability to meet in person, the partnership between the Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz flourishes. A very successful virtual Advent communion service between the two churches took place last year and this was followed by another joint Pentecost communion service, with a focus on young people in the two churches. Perhaps the prize for the most creative event goes to Scottish College ordinand, Roberta Ritson, who organised an online Shrove Tuesday pancake party. It was much appreciated by both German and UK church members. At the end of July 2021, St Andrews URC, Roundhay, Leeds will be marking their 50-year partnership with the Lutherkirche in Frankenthal, and a 30-year link with the Martinskirche in Bernburg, by means of an online service of celebration.
- 3.15 The URC Waldensian fellowship now has regular online meetings, the most recent of which featured the organisation Mediterranean Hope, set up by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, and which seeks to help those who arrive in Italy by boat from Africa. Anyone wishing to know more about the URC's European partnerships, please contact Carole Sired: carole.sired@urc.org.uk.

Interfaith relations

- 3.16 Following on from a statement of condemnation by URC Assembly Moderators in April 2020 about Islamophobic comments posted on the BBC website, a regular line of communication has opened up with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). From this growing relationship, the idea germinated for a pilot in the November 2020 Inter Faith Week, which would partner churches and mosques for a series of online conversations. Local URCs in Banstead, Blackburn, Darwen and Salford took part. The aims were to build friendship and understanding between Christian and Muslim congregations, some of whom may never have ventured to speak to one another before. The pilot proved very successful, and was broadened to include Methodist, Salvation Army and Baptist partners. The Christian Muslim Forum (CMF) also came on board, and offered support to those churches and mosques who want to make a more permanent commitment by joining CMF's established twinning programme. We will be rerunning the church-mosque pilot for Inter Faith Week in 2021. Any churches interested in being involved, please email Carole Sired: carole.sired@urc.org.uk



- 3.17 The Interfaith Enabling Group is currently updating the URC guidelines regarding the use of church buildings by people of other faith communities. The current information dates back to a document written in 1974.
- 3.18 As worship centres begin to reopen, any local URC looking for a small grant to fund an interfaith event can apply to the URC's Interfaith Enabling Group for support from the Interfaith Fund. Email Carole Sired for an application form and funding criteria.

4. Global and Intercultural Ministries

Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries: Karen Campbell
 Administrator (Global and Intercultural Ministries): Veronica Daniel
 Programme Officer for Global Justice and Partnerships: Kevin Snyman
 Administrative Assistant (Commitment for Life): Suzanne Pearson

Intercultural work

- 4.1 In the past year, much of the work of Global and Intercultural Ministries (GIM) has been shaped by significant world events – particularly the COVID pandemic and the killing of George Floyd, both throwing a harsh light on issues of racial injustice. In June 2020, GIM drafted a URC statement in response to George Floyd's killing. Whilst the statement was widely appreciated, many voices were crying out, 'What can we do?' GIM heard a sense of both urgency and possibility – a Kairos moment – and has responded as follows.

Racial justice conversations

- 4.2 Whilst public attention focused on the Black Lives Matter protests, GIM hosted two online conversations asking, 'Do Black Lives Matter in the URC?' – an opportunity and challenge for the URC to consider whether our own house is in order. An initial open gathering drew well over 100 participants, whilst a second session was reserved for black and ethnic minority participants only. The sessions replaced the 24-hour residential gathering for black and minority ethnic ministers and CRCWs and Cascades of Grace, cancelled due to Covid-19.
- 4.3 The planned residential for synod Racial Justice, Commitment for Life and Global Partnerships co-ordinators was another casualty of the lockdown. Instead, GIM hosted two online gatherings led by the Revd Dr Peter Cruchley, Council for World Mission (CWM) Mission Secretary responsible for the 'Legacies of Slavery' project, with a third reserved for the co-ordinators' networks. Thought-provoking conversations explored the shift from 'Not Racist' to 'Anti-Racist', addressing questions such as 'What does it mean to be white in a world where Black Lives Matter?' The open sessions each attracted more than 70 participants and received overwhelmingly positive feedback.

Legacies of Slavery (LoS)

- 4.4 GIM has consistently pointed to Legacies of Slavery as a concrete outworking of the URC's racial justice journey. The work of the Task Group was temporarily halted due to Covid-19 and lockdown. Resignations were received from Sue Fender and Ray Stanyon, later followed by group convenor, Alan Yates. Although numerically depleted, there remained a strong commitment and determination to get things done – and to do them well! Responding to an appeal from the Synod Clerks, the URC Legacies of Slavery webpage was launched at the beginning of October 2020. Work to refresh the page is ongoing, with featured resources to be placed under the headings agreed for the task group's focus: Apology, Reparations / Restorative Justice, White Privilege. A further section - Anti-Racist Living – will emphasise the commitment made by Mission Council, November 2020. The Task Group contributed to the Children and Youth resource 'Heroes and Villains' and launched the Black History Monthly in February 2021, an online gathering on the third Monday of each month aiming to keep issues of racial justice on the agenda throughout the year.
- 4.5 The Task Group's membership is being bolstered in preparation for the denomination-wide consultation bringing feedback to General Assembly 2022. Karen Campbell and Kevin Snyman maintain GIM's presence, working alongside Stephen Ansa-Addo and John Campbell. John has committed two days each week for six months as his sabbatical project, and the group has recently welcomed Victoria Turner and Zaidie Orr. We are delighted that David Reynolds,

Professor Emeritus of International History at Cambridge University, has agreed to become the convenor of the Task Group.

Anti-racist Church resolution

- 4.6 GIM drafted this resolution committing the URC to an intentional journey from 'not racist' to actively 'anti-racist', adopted by Mission Council in November 2020 with 100% agreement. Unsurprisingly, there has been pushback. Some people argue that the URC is not racist – so is this not a waste of energy? Others express frustration – 'Doesn't this just repeat previous commitments which have not been acted upon?' There is a real sense that this time, we MUST make it count!
- 4.7 This resolution seeks to give concrete expression to resolutions adopted in previous years. It is not a project, not an initiative, but a commitment to a way of being and living. Various areas of work are currently being explored / developed:
- Template letter – enabling a quick response to queries
 - FAQ document
 - An independent racial justice audit
 - Resourcing the Racial Justice Advocates and Cascades of Grace to support the over-arching anti-racist journey
 - Legacies of Slavery – ensuring that work undertaken resources the anti-racist commitment.

Racial Justice networking / Ecumenical work

- 4.8 Collaborative relationships have been developed with colleagues in the Baptist Union of Great Britain and CTBI. The GIM Secretary participates in the newly formed Racial Justice Advocacy Forum (RJAF) which seeks to enable more effective and prophetic action by the Churches regarding racial injustice, and has joined the core group taking this work forward. She is currently involved in planning for a George Floyd anniversary service, plus conversations for ecumenically produced Racial Justice Sunday materials. She is also part of a new Racial Justice Working Group devised by CTE. The aim is to ensure the URC has a presence in relevant conversations which may contribute to our anti-racist journey, learning from and supporting our partners in their journeys too.

Global work

- 4.9 There has been contact with several Global Partners through introductory emails from Karen Campbell as the new Secretary for GIM, a video greeting for the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) General Assembly 2020, and facilitating a greeting for the URC's General Assembly from the Revd Keith Haley, General Secretary of the Guyana Congregational Union. GIM sent a message of support for a peace event held by the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) marking the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, whilst former URC Assembly Moderator, David Grosch-Miller added his name to the People's Korean Peace Declaration.
- 4.10 We have had presence at online meetings of partners of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (NESSL) and the Taiwan Ecumenical Forum (TEF). Karen Campbell and David Grosch-Miller are representing the URC on the newly formed TEF Theological Reflection Group. John Bradbury is a current President of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe.

- 4.11 The **CWM Partners in Mission (PiM)** programme is the means by which the URC sends and receives mission partners. Two of our three PiM relationships have required intensive support in the past year:
- Alison Gibbs, based in Zambia, returned to the UK in March 2020 for eye surgery. Subsequent health issues – and Covid-19 travel restrictions – threw up numerous practical concerns, preventing Alison from going back until late August. GIM Administrator, Veronica Daniel is to be commended for her outstanding patience and determination in resolving the issues. GIM's current focus is to complete arrangements for Alison's retirement and return to the UK in December 2021.
 - The Revd Yufen Chen, working with the Taiwanese Fellowship in London, has had a turbulent year. There was prolonged uncertainty regarding the project base, Lumen URC, with the church finally deciding to close in July 2020, and Thames North Synod was unable to commit dedicated space to the project. Simultaneously, the pandemic saw the departure of the majority of the Taiwanese students with whom Yufen had been working. Despite these challenges, Yufen has remained positive and resourceful. She has devised new online initiatives and spearheaded an online service commemorating James Laidlaw Maxwell, a medical missionary credited with the formation of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, drawing participants from both the UK and Taiwan. The PiM management group is exploring possibilities for relocating and renegotiating this project.
 - So-Young Jung, from the Presbyterian Church of Korea, has settled into her role as lay missionary with the New Malden and Kingston churches in Southern Synod, and has been developing excellent work with children and young people in the midst of the lockdown.
 - Although not a formal PiM relationship, the URC and PCT jointly support the work of Selena Tai with the St Peter's House Chaplaincy in Manchester. Selena was furloughed during the first Covid-19 lockdown. Subsequent conversations sought to resolve various arising queries and ensure the URC and PCT are kept informed of any further unexpected developments.
- 4.12 GIM appreciates the role of the **International Exchange Reference Group (IERG)** in overseeing and supporting the mission partners. Thanks to Paul Whittle for maintaining contact with Alison Gibbs and initiating URC conversations in preparation for her retirement. Farewell to Judith North who completed her term as IERG Convenor, and thanks to Revd Ana Gobledale, who has taken up the role.
- 4.13 GIM has supported various **Council for World Mission** online initiatives and gatherings – writing resource materials, joining webinar panels, and disseminating information to encourage URC participation. We have participated in online conversations involving churches from CWM Europe and Caribbean regions, enabling a better understanding of our partners, their contexts and work. CWM has informed and contributed to URC initiatives.
- 4.14 The URC is represented in CWM's governance through Lindsey Brown, who is a Trustee of the Council for World Mission (UK). Lindsey served on a panel commending Revd Jooseop Keum (Presbyterian Church of Korea) as CWM's

General Secretary to serve from July 2021. Karen Campbell becomes the Annual Members Meeting representative from June 2021.

- 4.15 GIM launched a URC-wide **Beirut emergency appeal** to support the relief efforts of our local partner, NESSL, following the explosion in August 2020. The appeal raised more than £15,000 including match-funding from the URC's World Church and Mission Fund.
- 4.16 A funding request from the **Presbyterian Church in Myanmar (PCM)** for a project to upskill women through training as nurse aids was agreed in principle. The arrangement has not been finalised due to the military coup of 1 February 2021. GIM has been in contact with the Revd Ramthanga, PCM General Secretary, expressing solidarity. A URC statement of support was released in March, including a prayer written by the Assembly Moderators.

Commitment for Life

- 4.17 Commitment for Life (CfL) is the URC's global justice programme. In the last 12 months, CfL has witnessed the considerable impact of Covid-19 on our global partners. While Covid-19 has undoubtedly affected all of us, our partners in the global south have borne the brunt of the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, including our collective inability to co-ordinate a caring and just rollout of Covid-19 vaccines worldwide. CfL appreciates the current emphasis in GIM highlighting the ongoing impact of the Legacies of Slavery on the global financial architecture, and how this continues to work to the detriment of our global south partners.
- 4.18 Though Covid-19 has affected our work considerably, it has offered opportunities for new ways of engaging through prayer, learning and activism. In addition to our customary annual CfL communications, we have leveraged the reach of YouTube, Zoom and other media (FB: @comm4life) to share and communicate our message.
- 4.19 Christian Aid contact, Charlotte Scott, returned from maternity leave, and continues to provide support for our engagement with CfL partners in Central America, Bangladesh, Zimbabwe and Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. We thank Sarah Wake for her support during Charlotte's absence. We are delighted to be working with Helen Howe, Christian Aid's National Church Liaison Officer, who has been instrumental in assisting the URC generate its 'Just Scripture Programme' as part of CfL's engagement with the Education and Learning integration consultation. Helen also assisted in setting up the URC's well-received 'Grateful for our Vaccine' giving page.
- 4.20 Our partner Global Justice Now has helped shape our response to the pandemic, including the plea for full UK support for the COVAX programme, signing up to the World Health Organisation's Covid-19 technology access pool, and support for The People's Vaccine. Sandra Wild and Heidi Chow are CfL's points of contact. For further information about why this work is critical for our partners, watch this video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-z0pZ7fzL-Q&feature=youtu.be
- 4.21 CfL helped curate and deliver the Fairtrade Foundation's 2021 Fairtrade Fortnight ecumenical service of worship.

- 4.22 We said farewell with gratitude to Alan McGougan, and welcomed Richard Lewney as convenor of the CfL Reference Group. The group has spent time reviewing its remit and terms of reference. Following Christian Aid's restructuring in Central America, it has researched the implications of reducing CfL support to three, from four, global regions. There is support in the group to push for an advocate in each synod. The Reference Group has identified a key focus for the short to medium term – widening CfL visibility to and engagement with the two-thirds of URC congregations that are not yet active Commitment for Life supporters.
- 4.23 Although donations to CfL have fallen, they are much better than expected. The total giving to CfL in 2020 was £253,422 which is about 23.1% down on the £329,901 collected in 2019. We appreciate the ongoing generosity and commitment of local congregations to the cause of global justice during these very difficult times.

5. Mission and evangelism

Deputy General Secretary: Mission: Francis Brien
Administrator: Carole Sired
National Rural Officer: Elizabeth Clark
Co-ordinator for Fresh Expressions: Linda Rayner
Project Manager for Walking the Way: Simon Peters

Vision2020

- 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. From 2010 to 2020, this work was focused on vision2020, the URC's ten-year framework for mission. An evaluation of vision2020 is being completed and will be presented to Mission Council in November.

Walking the Way, living the life of Jesus today

- 5.2 The Project Manager for Walking the Way has continued to support churches and synods in a very active way throughout the pandemic, offering webinars, organising network meetings, and collaborating with others on resources. The Steering Group has considered feedback on Walking the Way's future and has developed proposals for the way forward. More information is given in a separate paper.

Projects and partners

- 5.3 As in 2020, this year's **Greenbelt** festival has been cancelled. The URC planning team had put an enormous amount of work into a much more involved presence for 2021. Alongside the craft activities, we had also built in a family friendly café facility in a much larger tent. This would enable us to provide a space for music, storytelling, worship and talks. To facilitate this more ambitious presence, 46 volunteers had already signed up. We now look forward to taking this format forward to the 2022 festival, when we will also be celebrating the URC's jubilee.
- 5.4 We were actively involved in planning a major ecumenical conference on Missionary Discipleship, organised by the **CTE Group for Evangelisation**. The conference was offered online in November 2020 and brought together a wide range of people from the CTE member churches and partners. The next conference will be held from 16 to 18 November 2021.

- 5.5 The URC continues to partner with **HOPE**, who in the past year have provided excellent resources for local churches to help them engage with their communities in the pandemic (www.hopetogether.org.uk). In collaboration with CTE, HOPE has also offered webinars on 'Edging into Hybrid Church'. This year, we have promoted **Thy Kingdom Come**, encouraging churches to join the global, ecumenical prayer initiative that is taking place from Ascension to Pentecost (www.thykingdomcome.global).

Networks

- 5.6 We support the work of synod **Mission Enablers** by facilitating regular meetings for networking, sharing and support. During to the various lockdowns the Mission Enablers met more regularly online, reflecting on how the pandemic has affected the life and mission of the churches. Many churches have responded in very innovative ways to keep meeting as church (often online) and to remain a presence and support in their communities.
- 5.7 Now that churches are coming out of lockdown and returning to in-person worship the Mission Enablers are beginning to reflect on what churches and synods can learn from the experience. Many churches are now combining online and in person worship, and several Mission Enablers are involved in equipping them for this new reality of hybrid church.
- 5.8 Many people are now also reflecting on their church buildings, and how they can be used for mission. How live an issue this is was demonstrated recently, when over 250 people logged on to a webinar on the theme 'Building for the Future' organised by the **URC Buildings Forum**, a network affiliated with the Mission Committee.

Fresh Expressions

- 5.9 We continue with the process of embedding fresh expressions thinking and practice into the URC¹. This is the task of the Fresh Expressions Enabling Group (FXEG) set up by the Mission Committee. The group includes representatives from the Mission and Discipleship departments, as well as the Pioneers network and Synod Moderators. The group has met several times in the past year to reflect on the opportunities the lockdowns have created for churches to experiment with new ways of meeting. A strategy and action plan has been developed to encourage recognition of all kinds of church, both traditional and new – a 'mixed ecology of church'.
- 5.10 The group has also considered questions regarding theology and church order which have arisen, including the need for a specific definition of church and how this might be recognised in a new context. These have been sent to the Faith and Order Committee for further consideration and feedback.
- 5.11 Members of the FXEG participated in the Fresh Expressions Partners Learning Community in November 2020. This is an annual ecumenical gathering of the embedding groups within the partners of Fresh Expressions (the Church of

¹ 'Fresh expressions of church (fx) are new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don't 'go to church'.

England, the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union, the Salvation Army, the Church of Scotland and the URC). The meeting offered a good opportunity to exchange ideas and plans with one another.

- 5.12 'The Gathering' of URC people involved in pioneering (most of them in a lay / voluntary capacity) now meets every six weeks or so on Zoom – a major change from the original intention, which was to have three residential meetings in a year starting in January 2020. The group is working through the Godsend material from Fresh Expressions, which provides inspiration and a strategy for anyone starting a new expression of church. It is hoped that a second cohort of The Gathering can commence in 2022.
- 5.13 The URC Pioneer Ministers comprise both Special Category Ministry (SCM) and synod employed posts. Some are ecumenical. At the time of writing, a meeting of the group is being set up, again for mutual support and learning.

Rural Mission

- 5.14 It has been encouraging to see how rural churches have coped with the Covid-19 pandemic. Services have taken place online where possible, by phone in some cases and service sheets have been delivered through people's letterboxes. Innovative ways have been found to support communities in terms of isolation and with practical help through food banks etc.
- 5.15 It is not all positive, as conversations across denominations show that in some cases difficult decisions have been brought forward and some churches will have to close, while others will need to find new ways of being church. The concept of an effective Christian presence remains important as we think about when, where and how to worship and do mission in rural areas post- Covid-19. Helping churches to reflect on this is a key part of the role of the National Rural Officer (NRO), Elizabeth Clark.
- 5.16 Isolation and loneliness have become key issues during the various lockdowns. Although by no means only a rural issue, those who live in isolated communities can find it harder to make social contacts. The Arthur Rank Centre, where Elizabeth is based, has been working on this issue for some time and has produced various resources which can be found at arthurrankcentre.org.uk/mission/rural-isolation-and-loneliness-toolkit/. This includes 'Table Talk' cards to help churches to talk about loneliness.
- 5.17 The Church needs to be prepared to advocate for the rural 'left behind'. Recent research reminds us that 'low pay is more prevalent and more persistent in Rural Britain than in urban areas' (Shucksmith, Chapman, Glass and Atterton, 2021, *Rural Lives*). Also, the percentage of people in poverty is the same in both urban and rural communities.
- 5.18 Other issues have also been high on the agenda of the National Rural Officer. Access to broadband is a continuing problem in some areas, and this has been underlined during lockdowns. Improved access to good and reliable broadband is essential for rural businesses and communities, as is access to public transport. The farming community is facing ongoing difficulties due to trade agreements after Brexit. Covid-19 has accelerated changes in all communities include rural

ones. The NRO continues to support the rural church in facing these changes, and speak out for those who do not have a voice.

- 5.19 Elizabeth Clark retires from her post in August 2021. This is a post that is shared with the Methodist Church. Mission Committee would like to express its thanks to Elizabeth for her years of faithful service to the URC and the Methodist Church, and wishes her every blessing in retirement.
- 5.20 The Methodist Church has recruited a full time National Rural Officer post, starting in the summer of 2021. This means that the joint NRO post will not continue. Mission Committee expressed strong support for the continuation of a NRO post in the URC and encouraged further exploration and conversation as to how this might be put into effect. Aware of the current financial challenges to the Church, the committee accepted the proposal that recruitment for a new post is put on hold, and that an evaluation is carried out into the impact of the post on the URC. Following this evaluation and further conversations with the Arthur Rank Centre, a proposal for resourcing rural ministry and mission will be brought to the Mission Committee in February 2022.

Conclusion

- 6.1 The Mission Committee is grateful to the staff of the Mission Team, all of whom have worked incredibly hard during the last year. They have risen to the challenge of working remotely, and have responded with creativity and dedication. The report offers an insight into the huge range of work that has been carried out in the past year, work that gets to the heart of what it means to be God's Church: building relationships, challenging injustice and, as Christ's people, making a difference to the world.