

Paper I2

Environmental task group

Mission committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Bernie Collins, Convenor of Mission Committee bernie.collins@thecrocker.net Simeon Mitchell, Secretary for Church and Society simeon.mitchell@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Mission Council, acting on behalf of General Assembly:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. thanks the environmental task group for the valuable work it has undertaken on the Church's behalf since 2016b. agrees that the purpose and remit of the environmental task group shall be restated as follows: The purpose of the environmental task group, established by General Assembly in 2016, shall be to encourage and assist the United Reformed Church in the implementation of its Environmental Policy and commitment to reduce its carbon footprint. <p>The group, appointed until 31 July 2022 in the first instance, shall be funded from the mission committee budget, and report to the mission committee.</p> <p>The task group's remit shall be to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Compile, produce or commission resources for worship and teaching related to themes contained in the environmental policy2. Champion and promote the Eco Church and Eco-Congregation Scotland programmes across the Church3. Consider the budgetary implications of implementing the environmental policy4. Collate and share data to enable the Church to track and reflect on progress towards reducing its carbon footprint5. Liaise with the United Reformed Church investment committee, and to assist the relevant bodies within the United Reformed Church regarding decisions

	<p>relating to the investment of Church funds in fossil fuels</p> <p>6. Encourage and assist Assembly committees and others in developing new ways of meeting and working which have environmental benefits</p> <p>7. Keep the environmental policy under review in the light of progress, new evidence and an evolving context, and bring proposals and recommendations to and through the mission committee for further steps that the URC could take to fulfil the commitments set out in the policy.</p>
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Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	An update to the remit of the environmental task group appointed by General Assembly in 2016.
Main points	The remit has been reviewed in the light of experience and in conjunction with the mission committee.
Previous relevant documents	Environmental policy, General Assembly 2016.
Consultation has taken place with...	Members of the environmental task group Mission committee.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	None.

1. Background

When the URC’s General Assembly of 2016 adopted a new Environmental Policy, it also appointed a task group to oversee and champion its implementation. The specific resolution was:

General Assembly resolves to appoint a task group until 31 July 2022 in the first instance, of four persons, to be appointed by the nominations committee and funded from the mission committee budget, to monitor the United Reformed Church’s progress toward meeting its commitment to reduce its carbon footprint, reporting to the mission committee.

The task group’s remit shall be to:

- a) compile, produce or commission resources for worship and teaching related to themes contained in the environmental policy
- b) consider the budgetary implications of implementing the environmental policy
- c) commission a suitable individual or body to calculate the Church’s carbon footprint, enabling a benchmark to be set against which future reductions in this footprint may be made

- d) liaise with the United Reformed Church investment committee, and to assist the relevant bodies within the United Reformed Church regarding decisions relating to the investment of Church funds in fossil fuels.

2. Need for review

The environmental task group (ETG) reported on its work to the mission committee in June 2018. This showed the considerable and encouraging progress that had been made in implementing the Environmental Policy, especially in the numbers of local congregations engaged in the Eco Church and Eco-Congregation Scotland programmes.

It also highlighted some challenges that the group was facing in carrying out its task. Some of these related to the way that the Environmental Policy was framed and the ETG's remit was formulated. Therefore, the mission committee agreed that the group should be invited to review and reflect on its remit and resourcing. The Secretary for Church and Society worked with the group on this review through the autumn of 2018, and a report was considered by mission committee in February 2019. As a result, this proposal for an updated remit for the ETG is brought to Mission Council.

3. Review areas

3.1 Overall purpose of group

It is clear from parts a-d of its remit that the group was being asked to do far more than simply “monitor the United Reformed Church’s progress toward meeting its commitment to reduce its carbon footprint” – yet that was its stated purpose. The environmental policy has a wider concern than just the Church’s carbon footprint, although that is a key metric.

It is proposed that the group’s purpose be restated to recognise its important role in encouraging the implementation of the whole environmental policy, as well as keeping the policy under review in the light of a rapidly changing context.

Remit part c)

commission a suitable individual or body to calculate the Church’s carbon footprint, enabling a benchmark to be set against which future reductions in this footprint may be made

Carbon footprinting can be a very worthwhile exercise. However, recent consultations with other denominations have confirmed that it is also notoriously complex and difficult to calculate in large dispersed organisations, especially where few central records are kept of relevant data. Previous attempts have been made within the URC, without much success. Often, too many assumptions have to be made for it to be meaningful.

One option would be to outsource this task, as this section of the remit envisages. However, when the group was established, it was allocated a budget through the mission committee, of £1500 a year. This would be wholly inadequate to commission a professional body to carry out this task, quite aside from the operational challenges of doing so.

Some measures of progress towards reducing the Church's carbon footprint that would be more straightforward to track would be:

- numbers of URC congregations registered on the Eco Church and Eco-Congregation programmes, and their level of awards (both these programmes include a carbon-footprinting exercise in their Gold Awards)
- the CO₂ impact of travel to General Assembly, Mission Council and Assembly Committees.

Every area of the Church's life needs to hear and respond to the challenge of climate change through examination of its own practices. However, it is proposed that the ETG should focus its limited resources and capacity on collating and tracking data on these two symbolic measures of the Church's carbon footprint, and share the results each year.

3.2 Additions to the group's remit

This review provides an opportunity to encapsulate in the ETG's remit activities that have been a welcome part of the group's work since its outset, such as championing the Eco Church and Eco-Congregation programmes across the Church, and liaising with those organisations on behalf of the URC.

It is also an opportunity to give the ETG a formal mandate to look at additional areas where it could make a helpful contribution to implementing the environmental policy, such as encouraging and assisting Assembly committees and others in developing new ways of meeting and working which have environmental benefits, and bringing recommendations for further steps that the URC could make to fulfil the commitments set out in the environmental policy.

3.3 Group membership and resourcing

Four members were initially appointed to the task group: the Revd Rob Weston (Convenor), Tom Veitch, the Revd Trevor Jamison, Charis Ollerenshaw. They are supported from Church House by the Secretary for Church and Society, currently Simeon Mitchell.

It was felt to be important to have a representative from Scotland on the group, so when Trevor Jamison moved on from his role as chaplain to Eco-Congregation Scotland to a position in Northern Synod, the group co-opted his successor, the Revd David Coleman, a URC SCM. The Revd Dr Kevin Snyman, Green Apostle for West Midlands Synod, was also involved in the group before moving to his new appointment. Ali Greaves from Northern Synod joined the group in the autumn of 2018 to act as a link into the Youth Executive.

The environmental task group is small, but focused and effective. It has co-opted people to the group who have particular expertise or who enable connections to significant constituencies of the church. As such, it feels its membership includes the representation and skills that are necessary to carry out its task. The group works closely with the Synod Green Apostles network to encourage and support action at local and synod levels, and is well supported by the Church and Society team in Church House.

With the proposed revisions to its remit, it does not feel it needs additional budget or other resources to fulfil its remit.

However, we need to recognise that the task of implementing the environmental policy cannot be left to a small working group, but requires the commitment of the whole Church, as set out in the policy. As a separate paper being considered by this Mission Council demonstrates, this task is more urgent than ever.