

# Paper 13

## Carbon emissions target

### Mission committee

#### Basic information

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<b>Action required</b>	Decision.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>Mission Council, acting on behalf of General Assembly:</b> a. urges the UK government to set a target and establish policies to achieve net zero emissions in the UK by well before 2050, and updates section 5.3(h) and 5.5(b) of the URC Environmental Policy accordingly b. makes a corresponding commitment that as a Church we shall strive to act urgently to reduce carbon emissions across the whole of Church life in line with this target, and updates section 4.2 of the Environmental Policy to give effect to this c. calls on URC members, local churches and synods to support these commitments in word and in deed.

#### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	This paper argues that the URC should update its environmental policy to endorse a net zero carbon emissions target for the UK.
<b>Main points</b>	The peer-reviewed science around climate change suggests that the UK and other nations must accelerate our ambition to reduce carbon emissions.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Environmental policy, General Assembly 2016 Hope in God's Future, Mission Council 2009.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Mission committee Joint Public Issues Team.

#### Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	None, directly.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	Adopting this position would align the URC's policy with that of the other churches in the Joint Public Issues Team and with Christian Aid, facilitating joint advocacy work.

## 1. Background

In 2009 the URC, the Baptist Union of GB and the Methodist Church jointly published and adopted *Hope in God's Future*, which set out a Christian understanding of the challenges facing our global ecology and their theological and ethical implications. The report provided an account of the peer reviewed science around climate change, and the implications for Christian discipleship.

*Hope in God's Future* endorsed the UK Government target for reductions in greenhouse gas as legislated in the 2008 Climate Change Act. The Climate Change Act requires UK-wide emissions reductions of 80% relative to 1990 levels by 2050 and requires five year carbon budgets that are currently agreed as far as 2032.

The URC's environmental policy, adopted by General Assembly in 2016, reaffirmed this target and committed the Church to strive to reduce its own carbon emissions in keeping with it, though this is not possible to measure with any precision.

## 2. New evidence of need for urgent action to tackle climate change

- 2.1 Since the national targets were identified, both the scientific evidence and the global ambition for action have developed further. In 2015 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published the Fifth Assessment Report to bring policy makers and the public up to date. The report concluded that changes to global climate already observed are unprecedented over decades to millennia. In Paris in December 2015, governments agreed to take the action necessary to constrain global average temperature rise to well below two degrees above pre-industrial levels.
- 2.2 In 2018 the IPCC published a report on the impacts of a greater than 1.5 degree global warming and provided an assessment of the actions required to avoid this scenario. Consequently the UK Government has asked the committee on climate change to provide advice in 2019 on a 'net zero' emissions ambition for the UK. In simple terms, net zero would mean our total emissions are equal to or less than the emissions we remove from the environment. This can be achieved by a combination of emission reduction and removal by offsetting.
- 2.3 The IPCC report on the impact of 1.5 degrees global warming states that for stabilisation of global temperatures at this level global net zero carbon emissions would most likely need to be achieved around 2050 (with an interquartile range of 2045 to 2055). However, this relies on the availability and affordability of substantial amounts of carbon capture and storage technology in the latter half of the 21st Century, a scenario that seems uncertain at best.
- 2.4 **It is clear that the commitments of both the United Reformed Church and the UK Government to advocate for concerted global action to avoid potential catastrophic effects of climate change now requires a reassessment of our UK carbon targets.**
- 2.5 If global net zero emissions are to be achieved at 2050 then developed nations (as these nations still have higher per capita emissions than most) must achieve

a zero carbon economy before 2050. On the basis of the scientific evidence available today, it is clear that the UK's resources, technology and ingenuity should be used to achieve net zero carbon emissions in the UK well before 2050.

Mission Council is therefore asked to support an update to the environmental policy to recognise that since its adoption, the peer-reviewed science around climate change suggests that the UK and other nations – and indeed, all of us – must accelerate our ambition to reduce emissions. This will enable the Church, through the Joint Public Issues Team and Commitment for Life, to continue its advocacy work on climate change, and, along with many others, push for net zero carbon emissions in the UK well before 2050. It will also serve as an encouragement for the URC to pursue the commitments made in the 2016 environmental policy with even greater urgency.

## 2.6 Proposed changes to URC environmental policy

In the paragraphs below ...

- ... plain text is existing wording we think should be kept.
- ... ~~text struck through~~ is existing wording we propose to drop
- ... ***text in bold italic*** is new wording we propose to add in.

4.2 We pledge to respond to the report's call for repentance in the face of our complicity in the sinful structures that are causing wanton damage to the earth, to its creatures and to many poor communities. We also commit to intercede for those threatened by climate change, and to adopt practices and lifestyles consistent with levels of carbon emissions the earth can sustain. Specifically, ~~and in line with the report's recommendations,~~ we shall strive to act urgently to reduce carbon emissions across the whole of church life in line with the ~~minimum 80% reduction by 2050 relative to 1990 levels, the target set by the Westminster government. We shall also strive to reach an interim goal of reducing our carbon emissions by 42% in 2020 relative to 1990, the target set by the Scottish Parliament.~~ ***target we are calling on the UK government to achieve, of net zero emissions by well before 2050.***

5.3 Accordingly, our churches will be encouraged to:

h) engage their local political representatives, urging them to support policies that take effective steps towards ~~realising the commitment to a minimum 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050 and minimum 42% by 2020;~~ ***achieving net zero UK carbon emissions by well before 2050;***

5.5 Assembly encourages the Church:

b) to campaign ***for the UK government to set a target to achieve net zero emissions in the UK by well before 2050, and to campaign*** at local and national level for policies that ~~strengthen, and take steps towards realising, the Westminster government's commitment to a minimum 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050 and the interim goal of reducing carbon emissions by 42% as set by the Scottish Parliament~~ ***this goal;***