

Paper I1

Report to Assembly Executive 2023

Mission Committee

Basic information

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1. Commitment for Life

- 1.1 Commitment for Life's thirty-year presence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (loPt), in partnership with Christian Aid, demonstrates the URC's effective and practical long-term commitment to the region. This presence and support are particularly needed at times of intense disruption and does a great deal more than making calls for change or signing petitions. That said, the URC has given strong assent to Christian Aid's calls for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, the unconditional release of all hostages and adherence to international law.
- 1.2 Commitment for Life is currently working with Northern College to offer lay-preacher support for the creation of Commitment for Life services of worship. The Revd Ana Gobledale has volunteered to lead Commitment for Life services of worship among the northerly Synods.
- 1.3 There has been excellent feedback from URC congregations and members who have used the Go-with-Greta resources as online or Bible Study material. Kevin and Suzanne met with Nuzhat Jabin, the Christian Aid country manager from Bangladesh, who has indicated her willingness to assist Commitment for Life on a Greta-goes-to Bangladesh publication in 2024.
- 1.4 We are grateful to Wessex Synod for our invitation to the Wessex Big-Day-Out.
- 1.5 Commitment for Life donations are on track at the time of writing, with final 2023 figures expected by the end of January 2024. We are grateful for the enormous generosity of URC members in the face of the cost-of-living crisis.
- 1.6 Commitment for Life is in discussion with Christian Aid on a range of forward-looking issues including a possible link up with the URC Legacies of Slavery work, support for Gaza, and for the ongoing crisis of Ukrainian refugees with reference to General Assembly resolution 71.
- 1.7 The URC is a voting member at the Christian Aid AGM

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4. Mission team staff change

After more than six years as the URC's Secretary for Church and Society, Simeon Mitchell moved to the Methodist Church in January 2024 to take up the permanent position as Team Leader of the Joint Public Issues Team. This is a familiar role to Simeon since he has ably filled the role as acting JPIT Team Leader for the last couple of years. During his time with the URC, Simeon has guided us as a denomination with considerable skill and wisdom, always ensuring that the URC has been at the forefront of engagement in the public sphere, alongside our ecumenical partners. His incisive knowledge relating to Church and Society matters and his passion for social justice have been widely appreciated across the URC. Fortunately, we will have the benefit of continuing to work with Simeon through JPIT and he will become a very near neighbour at the new Methodist Church House in Tavistock Place when it opens in mid-2024. We wish Simeon every blessing in his appointment.

Philip Brooks, Deputy General Secretary (Mission)

5. Global and Intercultural Ministries (GIM)

In the period since General Assembly 2023, racial justice has remained high on the Global and Intercultural Ministries agenda. Many people – within our own Church, ecumenical partners, and around the globe – share a sense that we are operating in a particular window of opportunity in the

slavery. They are exploring, with partner agencies, how four related pioneering posts might be established, with the potential to be hosted by local URCs. If an appropriate coalition of funding support can be put in place, the postholders would collaborate in developing joined up working across the whole URC.

The regional proposals are ambitious and will be the most complex strand to develop. The sub-group is carrying out research and seeking the input of external partners who can offer on-the-ground support, insights and experience.

5.1.3 Global: Working with Partners in the Caribbean and Africa (directly and/or through CWM)

Conversations are ongoing with partners in Jamaica as to how we might support work they are already advocating through the Churches' Reparations Action Forum (CRAF) 7-Point Plan for Reparations and exploring new project ideas to be developed together.

An Ecumenical Pilgrimage scheduled for April 2024 will see representatives from the URC, Church of Scotland and Christian Aid travelling together to Jamaica to express solidarity with partners in the Caribbean, and to further develop our individual church/organisational journeys.

5.2 Racial justice

5.2.1 Making Spaces

This 24-hour conference was held in July 2023, gathering 25 individuals from across the breadth of the URC to consider the predominantly white make-up in positions of senior leadership and influence in our Church, to share honest conversations, and to explore together how we might bring about change. Participants included people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, lay and ordained, individuals who occupy senior leadership positions and some who have applied unsuccessfully in the past. The event felt deeply meaningful and was very well received. It was requested that this should become an annual event, inviting different participants each time, and working in tandem with the anti-racism training to help bring about an anti-racist Church.

5.2.2 Speaking engagements/leading worship

The GIM Secretary has been pleased to accept invitations to share the URC's LoS/Anti-Racist Church journey through speaking and preaching engagements. It is a priority that local church Ministers and members should have opportunity to engage, to ask questions, and to help shape the journey if the commitment to becoming an anti-racist Church is to be understood and embraced as widely as possible.

5.2.3 Ecumenical

The URC continues to have an active presence in ecumenical racial justice conversations. We are amongst the founding members of both the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum (RJAF), coordinated by Churches Together in Britain & Ireland (CTBI) and the Baptist Union of Great Britain, and the

Racial Justice Working Group, coordinated by Churches Together in England (CTE). The networks work together and independently to engage with individuals (particularly in light of emerging crises), churches, public policies, politics, and the police. Recent work has seen the GIM Secretary serving on the planning group for a Windrush 75th Anniversary Service

partnership with CWM, and recent work has been intricate and time-consuming.

5.4.2 The Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM)

The long-standing relationship between the URC and the PCM was interrupted by the February 2021 military coup, making it impossible for us to continue as before, yet difficult to shape meaningful ways to proceed. We are extremely grateful that recent months have seen the relationship renewed, with many thanks for the efforts of Lindsey Brown, the URC Mission Support Officer. We were delighted to host the PCM's new General Secretary, the Revd Pek Muan Cuang in June and October of 2023, and to hear news of how the PCM is continuing its work even in the

- 6.3 'New Ways of Being Church' conference in the Pfalz
As Coordinator for Fresh Expressions in the URC, I shall be writing and presenting a paper at this conference in April 2024, with our long-standing partner churches in the Pfalz (the Palatinate region of Germany). The brief is to offer an overview of fresh expressions of church in the denomination (including ecumenical projects). To this end, we need to try to map our fresh expressions, and to understand how they interact with the more traditional churches.

Any wisdom from around the Synods would be most welcome. Please contact linda.rayner@urc.org.uk

- 6.4 Fresh Expressions Partners' Learning Community 2024
The Learning Community took place in January 2024 and a team of five Synod Mission Enablers, plus the Coordinator for Fresh Expressions attended. The Learning Community enables the team to consider the way forward for fresh expressions within the URC. The guest speaker was Emily Bradbury, founder and director of Courage to Thrive CIC.

- 6.5 URC Rural Hub
Many Synods have a named person who holds the brief for rural activities within the Synod. The first gathering of these officers took place online in December 2023. Intended to complement the ecumenical gatherings that are arranged from the Arthur Rank Centre, the plan for the first gathering was to discuss the format for the future, and was intended as a hub for mutual support and exchange of ideas and resources.

Linda Rayner, Fresh Expressions Coordinator

7. Ecumenical report

7.1 General Assembly 2023 Resolution 38

General Assembly endorses the measures for ecumenical working and resource sharing outlined in Reinventing the Ecumenical Vision of the URC Part 2 and encourages Synods to consider how they might make use of them to assist in addressing the areas of under-resourcing of our ecumenical commitments and in developing new ecumenical relationships.

8. Joint Mission and Discipleship Work: Mission Team

8.1 General Assembly Resolution 51a

General Assembly asks the Mission and Discipleship Departments to look at how mission, evangelism and ministry which would lead to the emergence of new United Reformed Church communities of discipleship and worship might be encouraged and resourced.

8.1.1 We welcome this resolution and are delighted to rise to the challenge of how to encourage URC churches (often working ecumenically) to set up new expressions of 'church' (using the term 'church' in its widest sense and including fresh expressions of church). This work sits alongside the paper from the Worship Faith and Order Committee '*Ecclesiological considerations for the United Reformed Church in conversation with Fresh Expressions*', which was mentioned in the General Assembly report and clarifies the position of the denomination regarding accepting new expressions of church as United Reformed Churches.

8.2 The following work has been undertaken:

8.2.1 The resolution was discussed at Mission Committee in September 2023, at the Joint (Mission and Discipleship) departments' gathering and also at the Mission Enablers' residential in December 2023. It will go to CRCWs, SCMs, RCL staff and CYDOs before we submit a formal response.

8.2.2 A joint Mission and Discipleship residential is being planned to respond to Resolution 51a and to invest in national and Synod facilitators (the networks) in 'curating and producing appropriate discipleship resources' to support local churches.

8.2.3 The Mission and Discipleship teams have begun work on pooling resources to assist in structural and resource support for new communities of Christian discipleship. This is currently taking three parts: mapping existing pioneering and 'plant' work; examining process; identifying opportunities.

8.2.4 The Mission Team, with Mission Committee and the Mission Enablers Network, are working on a number of responses to questions around evangelism1 (s)Tw 0..001 Tw ow-4 (o)-5 (re addns)4 (es)-1 2.(t)2 (o as) (u.)1 (pl0.5 0

programme of engagement in social issues, plus two popular and highly regarded youth spaces.

9.2 We continued the theme of 'Beyond Christians, Which Encourages Christians', inspired by the example of Jesus, Christians throughout history and Christians today, to take a stand against injustice and make a difference.

9.3 This felt very much like a flagship event for the URC, giving us significant visibility at a large Christian festival. Over sixty URC volunteers provided the welcoming environment that attracted large numbers to our marquee, which was packed to capacity almost constantly. Many of our volunteers shared how much being on the team meant to them personally and in their own faith journey.

9.4 In 2024, we will continue with our prominent low-cost café at Greenbelt, building again on our experience of the last two years. We will be working hard on growing the racial diversity of our team and also aiming to support a number of volunteers who are experiencing poverty, for whom coming to an event like Greenbelt would be impossible.

9.5 We will be putting together a proposal for General Assembly 2024, looking at how the Church can support our work at Greenbelt in 2025-2027. We are actively discussing with Greenbelt's management team an innovative approach to our involvement in 2025 which enables us to be 'even more URC' in creating a

- £ Buildings (and other premises)
- £ Transport (reduction and low-carbon)
- £ Venues (checklist to support selecting carbon-conscious settings).

- 10.2.2 Feedback from Synods indicates a varied picture, but most have an appropriate Environmental Policy. We have consulted with Synod Property officers regarding the information and resources they need when working with Local Churches. We are working on coordinating the guidance documentation produced by Synods. NZTG sees the Green Apostles network as a key partner that has already moved mountains.
- 10.2.3 Local churches vary between Gold Award Eco-Churches (Scotland: Eco-Congregations) and those which feel they have no capacity to move substantially towards net zero. Eco-Church/Congregation is now a major movement in British churches (with over 7,000 registered with the programme). A commitment to net zero is not a condition of registration, but it is still hugely encouraging that about a third of URC congregations have begun the journey. NZTG intends to use *Reform* to encourage local churches, but as yet we have been trying to see our way and have failed to find the capacity to produce an article. However, *Reform* has already been doing a good job of showcasing Eco Churches, with a profile of the newly Gold award-winning Clitheroe URC in the most recent issue.
- 10.2.4 Trusts and other associated bodies have not yet been asked to provide information, though the URC Trust is represented in our group.
- 10.3 Offering support and advice to all church bodies is largely about signposting to existing expertise and resources. NZTG has begun to look at how knowledge, resources and tools already in existence (or being developed) can be adapted to URC needs. Larger denominations have been able to assign/appoint staff capacity that the URC is unable to do. We have agreed a working partnership with the Methodists in which each denomination has a representative sitting with the other working group. NZTG has appointed Matthew McDade as our liaison for this partnership.
- 10.4 Finance, buildings and a pastoral earthquake. The willingness to act far exceeds the capacity of central funds to enable action. Synods vary in financial capacity, but probably none could enable all their existing local church buildings, manses and transport to reach minimal emissions. Church closures may ease this to a degree, but we will also need to encourage thinking that local churches may find unpalatable. NZTG has scarcely begun to assess the impact of the funding shortfall, but it is clear that a massive rationalisation of buildings is called for. The likely scale of disposal of buildings necessary to achieve net zero presents the Church with a substantial pastoral challenge and calls for a rediscovery of local church identity that is free of ties to buildings that cannot affordably be made suitable. There are encouraging signs (eg in the Buildings Forum, Green Apostles and some Synods) that some parts of the church are showing capacity for radical

action. It is noted that encouraging Church members to consider their own Net Zero opportunities would quite possibly have a bigger impact than focusing upon Church buildings.

- 10.5 Energy. Net zero means de-carbonising all our uses of energy, replacing fossil fuels with green energy. Even Zoom meetings are not currently carbon-neutral as data centres use significant energy. The transformation of all buildings retained (see 10.4 above) to reduce consumption and use only appropriate energy is a major part of the challenge. Offsetting energy from fossil fuels is not a sustainable option (see 10.7 below).
- 10.6 Travel: The Education and Learning Committee developed a spreadsheet to optimise journeys. NZTG will explore how this tool can be adapted for use across the church. Reducing in-person (face-to-face) meetings where it is viable to use internet platforms is an obvious direction of travel for committees and other bodies to develop.
- 10.7 Carbon offsetting. In response to requests and to our perception of uncertainties and abuses, NZTG has produced a statement on carbon off-setting (see appendix below) and offers it as potential URC policy.
- 10.8 Children will live the whole of their lives with the impacts of our carbon and other greenhouse emissions. NZTG is intentional about hearing the wisdom, insights, concerns and hopes of children and will encourage the whole Church to engage with the children.
- 10.9 NZTG feels that we have not made sufficient progress with our task. We recognise the magnitude of the challenge facing the Church, the limited time to accomplish it and the sense that our group includes key people who are already stretched. Maybe drawing up two cycles of three-year plans will help us become more effectively focussed.

Chris Baillie (Convenor), on behalf of the Net Zero Task Group: Philip Brooks (DGS Mission); Judy Harris (URC Children); Victoria James (COO); Jamie Laird (URC Youth, co-opted); Matthew McDade (Property Officers); Simeon Mitchell (Secretary for Church and Society); Eileen Newington (Green Apostles); Clifford Patten (URC Trust); Carole Sired (Staff); George Watt (Synod moderator); Maya Withall (URC Youth); Alan Yates (Finance Committee)

10.10 Appendix: NZTG Statement on Carbon Offsetting

Carbon offsetting is part of the landscape of efforts to combat climate change. To help us determine how it fits in to the URC Environmental Policy and net zero target, NZTG offers the following statement.

1. Eliminating emissions as far as possible is the priority. Offsetting does not offer an alternative to this. Only when all possible measures to eliminate carbon (and other) emissions have been identified should offsetting be considered. It is a last resort.
2. Some emissions are unavoidable, achieving net zero will involve offsetting these.

