

# Environmental Policy for the United Reformed Church

## 1 Purpose

1.1 This policy is an agreed, documented statement of the United Reformed Church's stance towards the environment in which it operates.

1.2 It is the cornerstone of our intent, as a body of people committed to caring for God's creation, to reduce our carbon footprint, improve recycling, minimise waste and improve efficiencies on finite natural resources in all of our operations.

1.3 It does not prescribe action for the Church or individual members, churches and synods, but as a statement of intent it provides a basis upon which appropriate action may be undertaken.

## 2 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

2.1 As a Church we affirm that care for Creation, a just sharing of the world's resources, and a concern for the environment are fundamental Gospel commitments.

2.2 We believe that God created and continues to create the whole universe, sustains and nurtures Creation, and wills to redeem the whole of Creation from its bondage to decay (Romans 8.21). We believe that the reconciliation of all things to God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus cannot be separated from God's act of creation: that all things have been created through Christ and for Christ –the Word of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth – and that, through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things by making peace through the blood of his cross (Col 1.16-20). We believe that creative and redemptive work also belongs to the work of the Spirit, who swept over the face of the waters in the beginning and who inspires a groaning Creation as it awaits redemption. We acknowledge God the Trinity to be the transcendent and immanent source, sustenance and salvation of all creation.

2.3 We believe that God entrusts Creation to our care, calling us to be stewards of it; calls us to be partners in God's ongoing creative, renewing and redeeming activity; commands us to act justly and in righteousness not only towards our fellow human beings but to all Creation; and requires us to care for Creation so that future generations, whom God also loves, can enjoy it and benefit from it.

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<sup>1</sup> This section draws upon the Baptist Union of Great Britain statement 'A Vision for the Environment' - <http://ew.ecocongregation.org/downloads/BUGBenvironmentpolicy.pdf>; and the Methodist, Baptist and URC report *Hope in God's Future: Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2009) p.7.

2.4 We affirm that Christian mission includes caring for God's earth and all Creation. It includes acknowledging humankind's responsibility, sharing in putting right the relationships within God's Creation that have gone wrong, and working within the church and with partners outside the church to grow towards justice and good stewardship as envisaged in the biblical vision of the world as it is meant to be.

2.5 We know that human activity has contributed to the degradation of the earth and that this is not the will of God. We believe that this degradation limits the attainment of the fullness of life that God wills for all Creation, and is a sin for which we should seek forgiveness. It also imposes most heavily upon the peoples of the developing countries of the world and is part of the intrinsic injustice to which we bear witness. As the Lambeth Declaration 2015 on Climate Change, to which the United Reformed Church is a signatory, affirms, 'The demands of justice as well as of creation require the nations of the world urgently to limit the global rise in average temperatures. We have a responsibility to act now, for ourselves, our neighbours and for future generations.'<sup>2</sup>

2.6 We recognise the significance of the December 2015 Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). One of its outcomes is to aim to hold 'the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °c above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °c above pre-industrial levels'<sup>3</sup> recognising that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.

### **3 Vision2020**

3.1 The previous Environmental Policy of the United Reformed Church, adopted by General Assembly in 2004, was founded upon *The Five Marks of Mission*, the fifth of which committed the Church 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation; to sustain and renew the life of the earth'. This policy is informed by the vision2020 strategic framework for mission adopted by General Assembly in 2010,<sup>4</sup> which declares that the United Reformed Church 'will be a church that has taken significant steps to safeguard the integrity of creation, to sustain and renew the life of the earth' (statement 10: The Integrity of Creation). Vision2020 also states that 'Our churches, reflecting faith in God the creator and sustainer of life in all its fullness, must discover the radical voice of care for the earth that is supported by the way we live.'

3.2 This policy echoes vision2020's affirmation that 'The changing climate and its consequences for all life on planet earth cannot be over emphasised as the most significant underlying issue of our time' – and that it is vital that the Church 'recognizes the reality and fear present in environmental debates and lives hopefully in the present climate.'

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2015/06/archbishop-of-canterbury-join-faith-leaders-in-call-for-urgent-action-to-tackle-climate-change.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/109r01.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.urc.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/mission/documents/vision2020genlassembly\\_report.pdf](https://www.urc.org.uk/what_we_do/mission/documents/vision2020genlassembly_report.pdf)

#### **4. 'Hope in God's Future'**

4.1 We affirm the view expressed in the 2009 report *Hope in God's Future* that 'it is now intellectually and morally irresponsible to fail to acknowledge and address the urgent need for radical cuts in greenhouse gas emissions in order to prevent intolerable damage to human populations and mass extinctions of many plant and animal species.'<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

#### **5. Shrinking our carbon footprint**

5.1 Reflecting the commitments contained in the vision2020 statement, in the *Hope in God's Future* report, and in a resolution on climate change passed by General Assembly in 2007, the United Reformed Church re-affirms its pledge to shrink its carbon footprint (the total greenhouse gas emissions caused by the Church's activities) and to strive to protect and restore the environment.

5.2 The Church recognises that this pledge calls for both *conversion* on the part of its individual members and *transformation* of its internal structures. The remainder of this policy, which incorporates the 'suggested indicators' contained in statement 10 of vision2020, follows through on this 'conversion' and 'transformation'. We will endeavour to work ecumenically whenever possible and appropriate as we act upon this policy.

5.3 Accordingly, our churches will be encouraged to:

- a) carry out a systematic environmental audit of their buildings and follow the strategies outlined below for reducing their carbon footprint; in this the resource *Greening Church Buildings* produced by Eco Congregation Scotland will be helpful;<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Hope in God's Future*, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> the A Rocha website contains a comprehensive list of suggested practices - <http://arocha.org.uk/our-activities/living-lightly-take-action>.

<sup>7</sup> [www.ecocongregationscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Greening-Church-Buildings.pdf](http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Greening-Church-Buildings.pdf).

- b) raise awareness, through prayer, preaching, Bible study, teaching and discussion, of the need for confession and repentance in relation to the causes of climate change, and of our calling, as God's redeemed people, to live joyfully, simply and responsibly with respect to God's Creation – caring for and treasuring that Creation, and celebrating all that is achieved in fulfilling that calling;
- c) seek to achieve 'Eco-Church' status [[www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk](http://www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk)] in the case of churches in England and Wales, or 'Eco-Congregation' status in the case of churches in Scotland [[www.ecocongregationscotland.org](http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org)];
- d) celebrate 'Time for Creation' as encouraged by the World Council of Churches.<sup>8</sup> Creation Time runs from 1 September until 4 October each year;
- e) ensure that energy is used efficiently and that their buildings are environment friendly through the use of energy-saving technologies and by identifying and using renewable sources of energy as appropriate;
- f) help members of their congregation to make adjustments in the carbon emissions associated with their lifestyles by supporting them in a personal audit and in finding appropriate strategies;
- g) involve their children and young people in activities focusing on care for the environment;
- 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;
- i) support campaigns and popular action around climate change issues as appropriate;
- j) ensure that church-owned land is used in ways that encourage an enjoyment of nature and both enhance and protect the environment;
- k) produce a piece of community artwork celebrating the Creator God.

#### 5.4 Our synods will seek to:

- a) encourage their churches to gain 'Eco-Church' status (in the case of churches in England and Wales) or 'Eco-Congregation' status (in the case of churches in Scotland); in so doing they will encourage churches to see the positive benefits in terms of the financial savings that environmentally-friendly practices can bring;
- b) develop and implement plans to become 'Eco-synods';
- c) ensure that their buildings, including manses, are environment friendly through the use of energy-saving technologies and by identifying and using renewable sources of energy as appropriate;
- d) encourage their churches to work in collaboration with, or initiate, local transition or sustainability groups;

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<sup>8</sup> [www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change/time-for-creation](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change/time-for-creation).

- e) encourage their churches to receive training and support on issues of climate justice and environmental care;
- f) appoint one or more 'Green Apostles' to monitor progress on carbon reduction in their synod (if preferred this role could be differently named, for example 'Sustainability Ambassador');
- g) draw up an 'environmental charter' along the lines of that adopted by North West Synod in 2015.

#### 5.5 Assembly encourages the Church:

- a) to lower incrementally its carbon footprint by a significant amount each year by carbon budgeting, that is by setting specific year-on-year reduction targets in the percentage of emissions over a defined period;
- b) 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;
- c) to ensure that its buildings are environment friendly through the use of energy-saving technologies and by identifying and using renewable sources of energy as appropriate;
- d) to reduce, where practicable, car and air travel for meetings through the use of videoconferencing. With due regard for distances and costs involved, individual members are encouraged to use transport with minimum impact – to cycle, use buses and trains, and car-share and use energy-efficient vehicles where possible. Members are also encouraged to adopt the practice of carbon off-setting with respect to essential travel by making payments supporting sustainable projects (e.g. through Climate Stewards);<sup>9</sup>
- e) to promote an environmental theology.

5.6 Assembly also encourages URC Youth to develop a strategy responding to the challenge of climate change.

## 6. Resources

### 6.1 We recognise and commend:

- Eco-Church, which provides an environmental toolkit and support network for local churches in England and Wales: [www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk](http://www.ecochurch.arocha.org.uk). In Scotland, this scheme is referred to as Eco-Congregation: [www.ecocongregationscotland.org](http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org).
- Operation Noah: <http://operationnoah.org>;
- Green Christian (formerly Christian Ecology Link): [www.greenchristian.org.uk](http://www.greenchristian.org.uk);

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<sup>9</sup> [www.climatestewards.org](http://www.climatestewards.org).

- A Rocha: <http://arocha.org.uk>;
- Climate Stewards: [www.climatestewards.org](http://www.climatestewards.org);
- 'Time for Creation' (World Council of Churches):  
[www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change/time-for-creation](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change/time-for-creation)).
- *Greening Church Buildings* (Eco-Congregation Scotland):  
[www.ecocongregationscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Greening-Church-Buildings.pdf](http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Greening-Church-Buildings.pdf);
- *Hope in God's Future: Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change* – report of a joint working group on climate change and theology convened by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2009);
- *Laudato si'*, the encyclical of Pope Francis (2015);
- Nick Spencer & Robert White, *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* (London: SPCK, 2007);
- the promotion of links with transition towns, etc:  
[www.greenchristian.org.uk/churches-in-transition](http://www.greenchristian.org.uk/churches-in-transition).