

Communications Committee

Communications update, including *Reform* magazine

Basic information

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| Contact name and email address | The Revd Dr Peter Stevenson, Convenor: revdpete@btinternet.com Mr Andy Jackson, Head of Communications: andy.jackson@urc.org.uk |
| Action required | To note. |
| Draft resolution(s) | <p>Resolution 16 General Assembly encourages all churches without websites to set one up as a matter of urgency, and to consider using the URC's iChurch initiative.</p> <p>Resolution 17 General Assembly welcomes the new look and feel of print publications used since 2019, and encourages all Synods, committees and departments to use the design and digital visual identity guidance from the communications team, so that all materials produced by the Church can share the same quality and consistency.</p> <p>Resolution 18 General Assembly encourages all members and friends of the Church to read <i>Reform</i>, the magazine of the United Reformed Church, and to subscribe to it so that, as it also approaches its 50th anniversary, it can continue to challenge, debate, refresh, enrich and inform.</p> |

Summary of content

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| Subject and aim(s) | An update of the work of the Communications Team since 2018. |
| Main points | To update General Assembly about the work overseen by the Communications Committee, including the work of the URC Communications Team, the Publishing Board and <i>Reform</i> magazine. |
| Previous relevant documents | |
| Consultation has taken place with... | Communications Committee, Publishing Board, General Secretariat, Finance, teams at Church House, Synod Moderators, other Synod staff, ministers and church members via social media. |

Summary of impact

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|---------------------------------------|---|
| Financial | Reduction in budgets and subsidy for <i>Reform</i> . |
| External (e.g. ecumenical) | Reports of more members; increased engagement on social media; clearer design for URC identity and continuity purposes. |

1. Purpose

The communications department exists to promote effective communication and celebration of the Gospel in and beyond the URC by:

- Giving voice to good news
- Facilitating regional/national communications
- Supporting the communications of Church House departments and General Assembly
- Resourcing the local churches.

2. Head of Communications

In the summer of 2018, a recruitment process began to find a new Head of Communications after Gill Nichol decided to step down after nine years of service.

The process selected Andy Jackson, a journalist and manager who has worked for the Methodist Church, Christian Aid, the Trinity Mirror Group, and also for the United Reformed Church as the Editorial Assistant for *Reform* in the mid-1990s. Andy is an Elder in the URC, a former Chair of FURY and his father is a minister who served at Over URC, Winsford, and Park URC, Reading.

Following consultations and his review of each of the areas of the team, the following changes took place.

3. Editorial guidance

The URC's House Style guide has been revised by Head of Communications, the Editor of *Reform*, Communications Officer and the Production and Marketing Officer of *Reform*. It is now available on the URC website. Simpler than previous House Style guides, this latest version shows how the Church will edit and format most documents, and the committee encourages all URC churches and bodies to follow it.

4. Graphics

- 4.1 Several long-standing, internal administrative processes were stopped after they had been reviewed. The team can now offer even more services to the URC.
- 4.2 The design of the 2020 Prayer Handbook, *Prayers from the heart*, demonstrates the impact of those changes. The standard edition sold out and the A4, lectern edition, which is also a large print version, has very low stocks.
- 4.3 In 2019 the team produced, amongst other items:

- *Join the family*, a leaflet about membership of the URC, which is free and has been ordered in its thousands. A Facebook post in October revealed that at least 15 people had become members of the URC after receiving a copy of the leaflet, and we hope the actual total will be much bigger
- a redesign of the *What is the URC?* leaflet, which as above is free and has been widely distributed. Both leaflets are available to download from the URC website and to order from the URC Bookshop, www.urcshop.co.uk (p&p applies)
- a redesign of the URC *Yearbook*, making it easier to use
- a redesign of the Prayer Handbook, again making it easier to use and to read. The price was reduced as well, making it more affordable to a greater number of people. The standard A5 edition has now sold out.
- a Lectern (large print) edition of the Prayer Handbook
- a set of URC merchandise, including logo lapel pins, lanyards made from recycled plastic bottles, name badges, sticky notes, notepads, window stickers, branded clothing, the Commitment for Life chocolate bar (a percentage of the sale goes to CfL), new logo design mugs, pens and pencils
- the *Church Engagement Diary*, an A4 diary for secretaries and lettings officers to use for the benefit of all church members. This is a product the URC used to produce many years ago and was commissioned when several requests for a replacement came in the same week!
- a range of Christmas resources including leaflets, posters and *Rejoice and Sing at Christmas*, a carol and song book for use away from local churches when the transportation of full hymn books is impractical
- a redesign of the URC Diary, making it much more useful for ministers and worship leaders, and the reintroduction of the A5 Diary
- Easter and Harvest posters, leaflets and service sheets
- URC Youth and URC Children's logos, the Lundie medal resources, *The Gift* – a resource for grandparents and godparents
- *Good Practice 5*, which will be distributed to all URCs
- a rebrand for Commitment for Life including eco-friendly merchandise
- the first in a series of URC Daily Devotions booklets, for group or individual use. The first was on Vocations; others are being planned
- *They've asked me to be...* series – written by Gill Nichol and relevant URC bodies, such as the Faith and Order Committee and CRCW Coordinator. These leaflets are free to download and explain a variety of paid and voluntary roles in the URC.

They currently include:

- *They've asked me to be a ... Committee Convenor*
- *... Committee Member*
- *... Church Related Community Worker*
- *... Church Secretary*
- *... Interim Moderator*
- *... Church Treasurer*
- This range of leaflets is being expanded to include Minister, Synod Moderator, General Assembly representative, Youth Elder and more. www.urc.org.uk/ask. Other suggestions are welcome.
- At the request of Youth Assembly and others, a leaflet about how to make public wifi available in churches was produced.

- This is available along with a new leaflet about making podcasts at www.urc.org.uk/information-guides.

4.4 Work in 2020

- resources for URC Youth Assembly
- a redesign of all certificates
- a low-cost family engagement kit for Advent
- revisions to the copyright and social media guidebooks
- materials for the General Assembly, including this Book of Reports
- more titles in the *They've Asked me to be...* series: Elder, Minister, member of General Assembly, Church Welcomer, Moderator, Children's and Youth Elder, children's work volunteer, youth work volunteer, and Safeguarding Coordinator
- updates to *The Manual*
- a new logo and website for the Retired Ministers' Housing Society
- marketing materials for *Reform*
- updated information guides about social media, dealing with the media, copyright
- a cardboard leaflet holder for the Church's booklets and leaflets
- Easter giveaway booklet
- *Walking the Way* merchandise and digital resources
- Children and Youth-Friendly Church resources
- *Stepwise* resources
- Updates on the resources available via www.cpo.org.uk/urc, a range of banners and posters for churches to customise and order
- Pilots booklets and resources
- Friends on Faith Adventures
- Logos for the General Assembly, Mission Council and Synods
- 2021 prayer handbook – 'Conversations'
- 2021 diaries
- Assembly Accredited Lay preacher badges
- Lent resources
- Constance Coltman book
- Commitment for Life resources
- Child Friendly Church Award
- Community Awards resources.

4.5 Equipment

After a cost and usage analysis, various pieces of equipment were sold off and leases ended. This not only saved the Church money on maintenance contracts but also freed up space at Church House. The committee will review the use of equipment again next year.

5. Digital

- 5.1 The URC website has undergone several changes in the past year, but it was quickly clear that more capacity was needed. In March, Catherine Kelliher joined the team as Digital Content Officer. The budget for this role was created after the Admin Assistant, Marketing Assistant and Yearbook Coordinator roles were

disestablished. The primary task of the Digital Content Officer will be to help transform the URC website.

5.2 The Communications Officer and Head of Communications have helped to grow the Church's social media channels, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Facebook by targeted advertising, using money that would otherwise have been used to promote URC products such as the 2020 Diary in print media.

5.3 The growth in Facebook and Twitter, both in terms of those who Like or Follow the URC's channel, and the development of its Instagram channel, has helped to get key messages and campaigns of the Church to even more people.

5.4 Facebook: www.facebook.com/TheUnitedReformedChurch

Likes (Jan 1 – Dec 31)

2019: 1,504 to **2,247**

2018: 1,366 – 1504

2,247 was a 49% growth on the final figure of 2018. This was achieved by starting to share the URC Daily Devotions every day and by introducing a content sharing policy of up to four posts every day. Any more and the Facebook algorithm thinks you are oversharing and reduces the number of people who see your content.

Reach (the number of people who saw content from the URC's page or about the URC)

2019: 1,043,232

2018: 365,473

An increase of 185%.

Using promotions on Facebook, the URC's content was seen 767,903 times by 288,820 people. This generated 3,800 clicks to the corporate or bookshop website.

5.5 Twitter: www.twitter.com/UnitedReformed

Twitter impressions (the number of times a tweet appears in a user's timeline)

2019: 854,700

2018: 387,900

A growth of 120% year on year.

5.6 Instagram: www.instagram.com/unitedreformed

This was launched in 2019 and currently has 396 followers. The content is usually the same as that shared on Facebook and Twitter but there have been experiments with Instagram-only content, such as using the Bible Lens app, which generates Biblical quotes based on the photos you want to share. This channel will be developed further now that the Digital Content Officer is in post.

5.7 Daily Devotions recordings

Following the massive success of the Daily Devotions, which in 2019 included a very large and positive response to a user survey, the devotions are now available to listen to on its website, recorded by volunteers. It is hoped that these recordings will become downloadable podcasts in the near future.

You can read the Daily Devotions and sign up to receive them by email at devotions.urc.org.uk. The series on Vocations is also available as a printed booklet from the URC Bookshop.

6. Communications and media relations

6.1 After the review by the Head of Communications, some administrative processes were stopped. There was also a full review of the paper documents and those stored digitally. All electronic documents are independently backed up in an offsite location away from Church House.

6.2 This freed up more time for the Communications Officer to curate the URC's corporate social media channels, continue to help the URC when dealing with ongoing and new reputation management cases, to curate and deliver News Update, the URC's monthly news email, to curate and publish multiple news stories in the URC website each week, to help with media training of Moderators and others in the church, to lead sessions at RCLs, and to assist others in the staff team with digital needs, including the development of the Walking the Way stories and new regular email.

4.3 The News Update email lost many of its subscribers after the introduction of GDPR in 2018 due to a historic lack of a confirmation email to verify that the person had signed up to the email. However, the numbers are building back up. At the start of 2019, there were 2051 subscribers and that number increased to 2531 by the end of the year, a 23% increase. www.urc.org/nu.

7. Publishing board

The Publishing board, a sub-committee of the Communications Committee, is chaired by the Revd Heather Whyte. The board's remit, agreed by the Communications Committee of October 2019, is to:

- assess publishing proposals from URC writers and unsolicited manuscripts and synopses and decide if they are publishable in line with the URC's publications policy (Paper C1, Mission Council 2016)
- identify gaps in the market and advise on publications that the URC may consider commissioning
- work with authors, editors and proof readers, voluntary and paid, along with URC ministers, CRCWs and staff when appropriate, in taking books through the publishing process, including copy editing
- publish approximately four URC titles a year in addition to the established annual titles, unless there are exceptional circumstances (e.g. notable anniversaries).

The Board has been involved with the following, each of which are at different stages in the writing and production cycle:

- the publishing of the essays about Constance Coltman, the first woman ordained into Trinitarian Christian ministry in the UK, edited by the Revd Janet Wootton
- publications to mark the 50th anniversary of the United Reformed Church
- a booklet about death and dying by the Revd Sue Walker, one of a planned series for churches about life events
- *A Great Cloud of Witnesses* part 3 by the Revd Barbara Bennett
- A series of reflections based on the film *Hook*
- A recipe book for foodbank users to be produced with and for the Trussell Trust, the nationwide network of food banks which provides emergency food support to people locked in poverty, and has offices at 86 Tavistock Place, London
- Exploring co-publications with GEAR.

8. iChurch

iChurch is the low-cost website platform for churches to set up and maintain websites quickly and easily. Some technical experience is necessary, but if you can add an image to a Word document, you can create an iChurch website.

The iChurch web platform had a difficult period in late 2018 and early 2019 due to long-term illness and support for iChurch web managers outside of the 20 hours per week that the iChurch Coordinator works.

The Head of Communications reached out to the founder of iChurch, Lawrence Moore, and VTS, the hosting company used by the Church, who agreed to further support the initiative. We are grateful to both for their help.

iChurch now has support via email, its own Facebook page and support website. There are backup contingencies in place using the Head of Communications, the hosting company and, should there be a large number of new website commissions, others who can assist with the building or redevelopment of church websites.

Lawrence Moore has run training events for iChurch in London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Newcastle, and further webinars and physical training events are also planned.

iChurch costs £9.99 per month, which is much cheaper than other church website providers, and the basic website set up cost is £150 (both excl. VAT).

If any church is interested in finding out more, visit www.interactivechurch.org.uk or email iChurch@urc.org.uk.

9. Bookshop

The URC Bookshop, urcshop.co.uk, is the service from the church that delivers all manner of publications and resources to the URC and beyond.

After a review of its finances, it became clear to the Head of Communications that changes were needed so that the bookshop operation didn't make a loss for the Church.

The committee agreed that a consultation about the bookshop being outsourced to a specialist sales and distribution firm should take place as there is a part-time member of staff who would be affected by any outsourcing.

An update will be available at the meeting of the General Assembly or of the Mission Council.

The bookshop's revenues continue to increase year on year.

10. **Reform**

Mission Council discussed *Reform* in November 2017. There was consensus that the magazine continues to make a valuable contribution to the life of the United Reformed Church, and it was agreed to extend the denomination's existing investment in *Reform* – not to exceed £90,000 in any one budget year – a period that finishes at the end of 2020.

When Mission Council was cancelled in March 2020, the Officers of General Assembly agreed to continue the subsidy to *Reform* until the end of 2021, with a reduction to no more than £62,000. This follows savings, detailed below, and a reduction in the 2020 budget to £74,000.

Mission Council will discuss the level of future subsidies at a future meeting, and the committee wants to acknowledge the work of the *Reform* team and the Head of Communications in reducing the subsidy by £28,000.

The value of *Reform*

The feedback that the team continues to receive online, by email, in verbal comments and by letter says that *Reform* inspires and challenges, provokes debate, keeps readers informed about the life and work of the Church, and continues to add something to our denominational identity.

The digital edition of *Reform*, launched in April 2015, offers alternative and much cheaper ways to read the magazine. The app is also more accessible for people with visual impairments, and it comes with a searchable online archive.

The communications committee believes that *Reform* contributes to the mission, discipleship and identity of the URC is well worth the annual investment that the denomination makes.

The *Reform* team, and the committee, have been mindful of the investment and have worked hard to reduce costs:

- In 2019 the mailing house was changed which saved the magazine around £12,000 per year in 2020.
- The printing of the magazine has changed so that the same company prints and distributes the magazine. A saving of up to £5,000 p.a. should be the result of combining the printing and mailing service.
- The subscriptions service is currently under review, especially in the light of a recent price rise. The team is looking at other ways to manage subscriptions and renewals and to market the magazine.

Reform generates advertising revenue but not at the level of a commercial enterprise – it is a tool for the mission and discipleship of the URC. *Reform* is used to promote URC publications and merchandise which improve awareness of the URC. Without *Reform*, those sales opportunities will be lost.

We should not think of *Reform* simply in terms of its cost to the denomination, but as a tool which we would invest in like any other. If someone interested in the URC or becoming a member was given a copy, they would read a whole range of interesting features about the URC and Christianity in general.

The magazine should also be considered in terms of helping those interested in becoming members, and sustaining those who are Ministers, Elders, other leaders, CRCWs, volunteers and members.

Many charities spend large amounts of money to recruit and retain regular donors. The URC is also doing that but instead of asking supporters for regular donations, it is making disciples of Christ, using *Reform* as a tool to help with persuasion, conversion and maintenance of that discipleship.

Reform Editorial board

The editorial board meets annually with members from across the URC giving feedback on the content, ideas for new content (such as the Here & Now column for younger writers), how *Reform* is received in local churches and how well it is serving their needs.

Content

As well as the monthly editorial from Stephen Tomkins, the magazine also includes

- news from the UK and the world which have a religious slant or impact on the church's work (e.g. Church and Society, Global and Intercultural Ministry)
- Readers' letters
- A Letter From ... location-based features covering a diverse range of subjects. In the past year this has included articles from the area of the Amazon where large fires are taking place to clear land; the Faith Bridge, the focal point in London for religious climate emergency activists; Budapest, Uganda, New Zealand and Angola.
- Art in Focus, fresh religious perspectives on well-known and little-known works of art
- Interviews with a wide range of people, some including controversial figures. In the past year this has included Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General of Amnesty International; Jack Monroe, chef and activist; Nadia Bolz-Weber, writer, speaker church leader; Benjamin Kwashi, Archbishop of Jos, in central Nigeria; Tim Farron MP; Ben Lindsay and Martin Mosebach
- Chapter & verse, new Bible studies that are also available from Reform's website for churches and groups to use
- I am ... articles based on roles, lifestyles or other usual and unusual perspectives. These have included articles from a farmer, someone on sick leave, an addict, survivor of economic abuse and a haemophiliac
- Commitment-Phobe, charting the journey of a former atheist on her church-based Christian journey
- Here & Now, a new column for younger writers in the Church

- A Good Question, where up to four people offer their reflections on a major question. Questions have included 'What do you think of the virgin birth?', 'Are you afraid of dying?', 'What is the Gospel?' and 'Is democracy broken?'
- Sheila Maxey's column on her continuing pilgrimage. Sheila is also the editor of the book reviews.
- Local church initiatives
- Film and book reviews
- The Reform Crossword, set by the Revd Colin Richards
- Do Stay for Tea and Coffee, a humorous column from Christian comedian and co-writer of *Miranda*, Paul Kerensa.
- Digest includes news from the URC and notices about its Ministers.

Community awards

Reform is again leading the Community Project Awards, in partnership with Congregational Insurance. The magazine founded the awards more than 20 years ago, and they offer three local URC projects up to £2,000 each for innovative projects which have positive effects on local communities.

Reader survey

In 2019, the *Reform* team conducted a reader survey. 70% said *Reform* was either Excellent, Very Good or Good.

Over the past year, the amount of URC-based content has been increased or made more obvious by the editorial team in the past year. A large majority of respondents agreed that *Reform* improves the way they see the URC.

One of the most recent introductions is the Here & Now column, which is for younger writers in the Church, and is being greatly assisted by the Children's and Youth Work team, for which we are indebted.

Digest, the URC news supplement, which is included with every issue, and includes reporting from Mission Council after it meets, is read by nearly all subscribers. A question still remains about whether it should be a supplement or part of the magazine.

The financial position

Reform continues to stay within the budget extended by Mission Council in 2017, and has not exceeded the £90,000 cap.

2018 - £75,294 (advertising revenues were unusually high)

2019 - £87,341

2020 up to £74,000 (budgeted)

2021 up to £62,000 (agreed by Assembly officers)

2022 up to £50,000 (to be discussed at Mission Council)

The 2020 budgeted figure shows a reduction of £16,000. The subsidy has always been granted on the basis that it may not be used, and the team is constantly

aware of the financial support the Church gives it and is extremely grateful for that support.

The challenge has always been to keep costs as low as possible while not sacrificing the quality of the magazine. As stated above, following reviews about various aspects of its operation, savings have already been made and more will follow later this year.

The outcome of all this is that the Communications Committee is confident *Reform* can continue to help the mission and discipleship of the URC, with a reduction in the level of investment that Mission Council has agreed in the past.

Subscriptions

The price of an annual subscription to *Reform* was held at £29.50 after the results of the reader survey. In April 2020, the number of subscriptions was 3,239. 10% of these are paid subscriptions to the digital edition of the magazine.

After the outbreak of coronavirus and the global lockdown, the digital edition was made free, as were back issues going back six years.

Marketing *Reform*

The communications staff have introduced the following new marketing initiatives:

- A free magazine holder for *Reform* distributors
- Free bars of Fairtrade chocolate for subscribers
- A £1 for three issues direct debit offer
- Letter campaign to lapsed subscribers
- Regular updates about the latest issue on social media
- A presence at the Greenbelt festival as part of the URC's associate partnership, with a special offer for those at Greenbelt
- A presence as part of the URC stand at the Christian Resources Exhibition
- Increased incentives and communications to church distributors, a loyal band of volunteers who play a crucial role in the life of the magazine. We thank them regularly when we communicate with them and we urge Mission Council, Synods and churches to do the same.

Supporting *Reform*

Read the magazine, especially if you've not read a copy for a while, and let *Reform* know what you think of it. All feedback is welcome.

Spread the message to your synods and churches – it is a resource for preachers, worship leaders, Bible study leaders, house group leaders and more. It challenges, inspires, and helps to guide to Christian life. Please encourage local churches and people to subscribe.

As has been said to the Church before, 'Don't lose *Reform*.' We are delighted that people value *Reform* enough to share it, but we hope it is shared with a plea that those receiving second or third hand copies, or photocopies of an article, would consider subscribing.

Another 1,700 subscribers and *Reform* would not need any subsidy from the Church.

Conclusion

Reform continues to be valuable to the URC and worth the investment that the denomination makes in it.

11. URC's eco policy

The committee reviewed a paper submitted by Andy Jackson to Simeon Mitchell, Secretary for Church and Society, about the environmental impact of its work and the efforts the communications team has made towards reducing the Church's carbon footprint.

As well as other measures that have already been implemented, the committee agreed to meet in person once a year, with the other meeting taking place by Zoom or Lifesize, and to look again at the packaging used for *Reform*.

12. Thanks

The impact of coronavirus has meant even more work for the communications team in different and difficult circumstances. The committee would like to thank the team for all that it has done and continues to do.

13. Resolutions

Resolution 16

General Assembly encourages all churches without websites to set one up as a matter of urgency, and to consider using the URC's iChurch initiative.

Resolution 17

General Assembly welcomes the new look and feel of print publications used since 2019, and encourages all Synods, committees and departments to use the design and digital visual identity guidance from the communications team, so that all materials produced by the Church can share the same quality and consistency.

Resolution 18

General Assembly encourages all members and friends of the Church to read *Reform*, the magazine of the United Reformed Church, and to subscribe to it so that, as it also approaches its 50th anniversary, it can continue to challenge, debate, refresh, enrich and inform.