



The
United
Reformed
Church



They've asked me to be a
**communications
volunteer**

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Introduction

The United Reformed Church (URC) is encouraging all of its churches to have a communications volunteer and this booklet has been primarily written for those who have recently taken up, or are considering taking up this role. Local church communications cover a broad range of activities and this booklet aims to give an overview of the role and the desirable skills and abilities of volunteers.

Effective communications are essential for all organisations – including churches – in the 21st century. The form they take will vary hugely from church-to-church but, at its simplest, effective communication means that those within the congregation know what is going on in the church and those without, who want to learn more about the life of your church, and the good news of the Gospel, can easily find out.

For some churches this could be as simple as a weekly email and/or printed newsletter/notice sheet (for the congregation), plus a smartly-presented noticeboard and a well-written and up-to-date website and/or Facebook page (for everyone else). For other, well-resourced, churches it could mean the above, plus, a social media presence, a regular local media presence (print and/or radio), a professionally designed church logo and a comprehensive range of branded stationery. Please don't be overwhelmed by the possibilities!

If you do decide to become a communications volunteer your first job will be to assess your church's current communications and work out how best to use the time and skills you have to make them as effective as they can be. You may also like to start to look at other churches'

websites, noticeboards and notice sheets – taking note of what you love and what you loathe, what works and what doesn't – and what can be adapted (or avoided!) by your church. When you start to review and plan future church communications do remember that different audiences both in and outside the church, will respond better to different types of communications – at its most simple a WhatsApp group could be a really effective way to communicate with the youth group; but the older members may prefer a print option for all core communications.

Please note that the URC communications department has developed an excellent range of information guides for those involved in local church communications. Not wishing to make this booklet overly long, or to reinvent the wheel, the relevant titles have been highlighted throughout this booklet text and we thoroughly recommend reading those that most apply to the communications needs of your church.

Why should churches bother with communications?

You may get asked why local church communications matter – some take the view that the way local churches present themselves is of no importance – the only thing that matters is the content – whether it's the time of the Sunday morning service or the fact that Jesus died on the cross to save us. We disagree.

Every day each of us is said to be exposed to at least 2000 messages – everything from TV and online adverts, to emails, social media posts,

marketing material and magazine inserts. Virtually all of these will have been professionally produced to maximise the impact on the recipient – so our argument is that, whatever it's communicating, the church is competing with all the other information we process daily. And if the church's message is not presented in the best way possible it's more than likely that its impact on the target audience will be minimal.

'The church is competing with all the other information we process daily.'

What does the role involve?

Local church communications encompass a wide range of activities and these are divided into internal and external communications. The core types of each are outlined below – and there is overlap with some communications tools – i.e. church websites, social media output and noticeboards – having information aimed at both internal and external audiences.

The communications work of the church is not done in isolation so you will have regular contact with the Minister/Interim Moderator/church leader and the Elders; expect to have a significant amount of contact as you start in your role – especially if you are changing an established practice or introducing new things.

If churches have more than one person in the congregation interested in helping with the church's communications then consider starting a communications group. The benefits are obvious – the more people involved the better the variety of skills available and the more you can do – but do ensure that the minister is part of this group, and that the Elders Meeting is updated regularly, as all communications activity must be in line with the church's overall aims. This is definitely a role for a team player, not someone who wants to do their own thing.

We can't stress enough that a communications volunteer is not expected to undertake/master all the areas listed – we recommend that, after the basics are taken care of, you play to your strengths and interests.



Skills and attributes of communications volunteers

- A commitment to making local church communications as good as they can be
- A desire to share church news and Gospel truths to the local community
- A basic understanding of modern communications practice
- An understanding of what makes a good story
- A good grasp of written English and grammar basics
- Computer-literacy
- An eye for pleasing design
- Willingness to be a team player.

Internal communications

Internal communications focus on ensuring those who are already part of the church are kept informed of all they need to know. Almost everyone will recognise the frustration of poor internal communications – of not being told something important or useful; examples of this type of information include the dates of services, coffee mornings and Christmas concerts to information on forthcoming synod training dates and news of present and past congregation members. It's a really important part of the mix, allowing everyone inside the church to feel part of church life – communications volunteers are advised to start here, ensuring that everything is working well before moving on to external communications.

The most useful tools for a church's internal communications are notice sheets, newsletters and social media (most often Facebook).

Notice sheets and newsletters

Almost all churches will have one or both of these and you may consider them so basic that any attention paid to them would be wasted, or that what's in place already works well so there's no need for changes. However, we do recommend taking a few minutes to review them – asking yourself if the information is clear – even to newcomers and visitors? Is it clearly presented? Is it free of unexplained abbreviations and church jargon? And, three small but important recommendations: Use only one typeface

throughout, check your grammar and spelling (don't just rely on spellcheck!) and, when mentioning people by name (e.g. 'for more information on the jumble sale please see Pat'), always use surnames as well as first names; use of first names only can give the impression that church is a cosy club – and if you don't know who Pat is, you really aren't welcome! (And please don't forget to check with anyone mentioned that they are happy to have their name and contact details included.)

The [Church print and publications](#) booklet covers newsletters (print and email), leaflets and church noticeboards in some detail and is definitely worth reading; the [Association for Church Editors](#) may also be of interest.

Social media

Social media is a fantastic resource/opportunity for church communications – both internal and external. Some churches, especially smaller ones, use Facebook instead of a website, and this can be an easy and effective solution to keeping in touch with the congregation and the wider world. The URC communications team recommends setting up a Facebook group, rather than an organisational page, and instructions on how to do this, together with information on the benefits of Facebook, can be found in [How to use Facebook for your church](#).

WhatsApp groups are also suitable for more informal communications with individuals or groups of people from your congregation and you may like to add this to your communications toolbox. If you're not already familiar with WhatsApp take a look at the [How to use WhatsApp](#) booklet.

External communications

External communications are all about getting the good news of your church's activities and the Good News of the Gospel out to the local community and perhaps beyond. The cornerstones of this type of church communications are websites, traditional media including print publications and radio, social media and noticeboards.



Websites

Although having a website is not a vital part of your church's communications – some churches communicate to the wider world really well without one – we would argue that, for almost all churches, having a well-designed and effective website is an important part of the church communications mix. In essence, your website is your 'shop window' or 'front door' – almost everyone interested in finding out more about the church will start with your website and so it needs to clearly convey the ethos of the church as well as containing regularly updated clear content.

There are plenty of good resources available for those looking to update their website or even to build a new one. One tip we would give is: Don't be over ambitious. The internet is littered with websites which are horribly out-of-date because those who created them don't have the time to properly manage them.

The United Reformed Church has its own website offer – [iChurch](#) – which can provide everything from template designs to use in creating a website to a website design service with full support management options. To find out more, and see if this might be a suitable web solution for your own church, please contact the iChurch coordinator at ichurch@urc.org.uk

Traditional media

By traditional media we mean local newspapers and local radio – both have a place in the communications toolbox of local churches.

[Dealing with the Media](#) covers this area in detail including tips on writing a news release, where to place your story and dealing with bad news – but there are four things worth highlighting here:

- If the church is involved in a good news story – e.g. a successful fundraiser or the church's practical response to a social issue, shout about it! Draft a news release, call the local radio station, get the story out there! And do so quickly – news is new, so act while the story is fresh.

'Draft a news release, call the local radio station, get the story out there!'

- Don't ignore local radio – local radio stations, like local newspapers, are often looking for local content and local spokespeople to comment on both local and national stories. Don't be scared to contact them.
- If you, or the minister or another member of the congregation, writes well, and enjoys it, you might like to consider contacting the local newspaper and asking if they would like you to supply a regular comment or opinion column. Such columns are driven entirely by the writer's point of view and can be anything from a serious political perspective, to a reflection on a Christian festival or a humorous observation.
- If your church is involved in dealing with bad or difficult news, you need to act quickly. The first thing to do is tell the Minister, and if that's not possible, then the Synod Moderator. One of those two also needs to inform the Church House Communications Team and they may ask you to do this. Whatever you do, don't be tempted to deal with it on your own.

Social media



As mentioned above, social media is a valuable resource for churches seeking to keep the local community up-to-date with their news. You'll almost certainly be using at least one social media platform in your personal and/or professional life and will already be aware of the benefits. However, do exercise some caution before signing up your church to all of the 'big four' channels, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram! There are two main points to consider – is it the right channel for your church and audiences (are your target audiences on the platform?) and do you have the time and resources to manage the account? If you can't commit to posting regularly it's probably best not to set up the account. Not using an account is akin to proclaiming that the church has nothing to say.

Two URC booklets cover the basics of Twitter and Instagram – [Setting up an Instagram account](#) and [How to use Twitter](#).

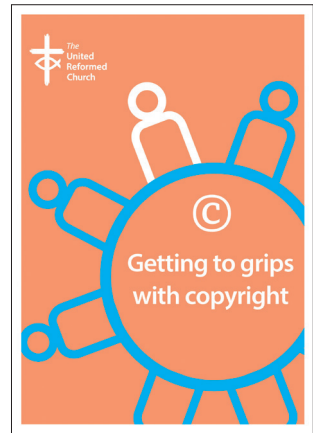
The golden rule

Whatever way you are communicating the golden rule is to communicate news when it's new and to keep everything updated and accurate – the website, social media platforms, noticeboards. A scroll through a selection of randomly selected church websites will soon reveal Christmas services being advertised in May and it doesn't take long before a peek at church Facebook pages shows many that haven't posted new material for months. Don't do this!

It should be relatively easy to keep websites and noticeboards updated with current information. If you're looking for information for your social media channels, we'd recommend following the URC's social media channels, and even supplement your own posts by sharing their posts where locally relevant. (You might also find *News Update*, the URC's monthly e-newsletter, a good source of stories. [Subscribe](#) and have it delivered to your inbox each month.)

Copyright

One other important area for local church communicators to be familiar with is copyright law as it applies to churches. It's an often overlooked element of church communications and we recommend reading the URC's [*Getting to grips with copyright*](#) booklet – and encourage the Minister and Elders to read it too!



Data protection issues

Do be careful about handling personal information – e.g. contact details and personal news etc. You may already be familiar with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which came into effect in May 2018. There are parts of it which will impact on your work as a communications volunteer so please do familiarise yourself with your church's privacy statement and understand what personal data is and how it relates to your role. The URC website has a [comprehensive GDPR section](#) and the [Hints and Tips](#) document is definitely worth reading. For more information on your church's data protection compliance please speak to the Elders.

Customisable resources

If you're interested in investing in branded print resources take a look at Christian Publishing and Outreach (CPO) website. CPO offer a range of customisable resources – bookmarks, posters pull-up banners etc – and they've partnered with the URC to produce a range of products that have been specifically tailored to help local United Reformed churches promote themselves, reach out to the local community and welcome visitors. The full range can be seen [here](#).

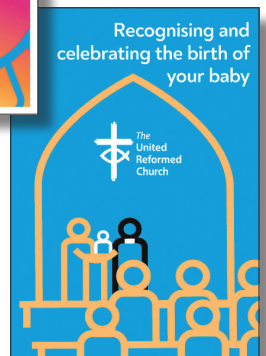
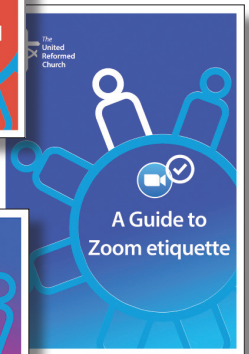
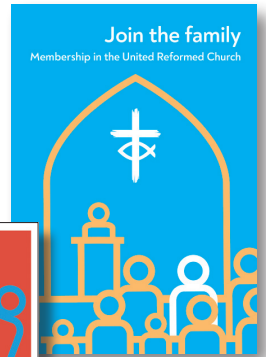


Training and on-going development

The communications team at Church House occasionally runs synod-based communications training workshops aimed at local church communicators. If you're interested in attending such an event please contact your synod training officer to let them know of your interest. In addition, there are some excellent [information guides](#) on a wide-range of communications subjects available on the URC website, several of them have been highlighted throughout this booklet.

The last word

If you do decide to take up the role, please contact the communications office at Church House at communications.pa@urc.org.uk and let them know you have taken on the role – it's really useful for them to have a list of local communications volunteers active across the denomination.



This is one in a series of booklets designed to give information to those who have been asked to consider taking on a role in the United Reformed Church.

The booklets can be read and downloaded at www.urc.org.uk/ask



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