

# Church print and publications

A short guide for United Reformed churches



*The United Reformed Church*





## Introduction

Every church I have ever worked with or worshipped in has produced some form of printed material – whether it’s a full-blown newsletter or a simple weekly notice sheet. Some of the printed offerings I’ve seen have been excellent, but, sad to say, the majority have not. The communications team at United Reformed Church House has put together this short guide to help churches make their print and publications look more professional – and work more effectively for them.

You will find lots of tips and ideas for improving church newsletters – both in printed form and as email versions with all their cost-saving advantages. We also share key guidelines for producing leaflets that will get noticed, and offer one or two brief thoughts about logos. Finally, we take a close look at external noticeboards – a vitally important but oft-neglected medium of communication, which can convey a powerful message about your church, for good or ill.

We hope the information in this booklet will encourage you to look afresh at your church publications – and see how, with a little bit of care, attention, and forward planning, they can make a more effective contribution to the outreach of your church.

**Gill Nichol**

*Head of communications*

*The United Reformed Church, October 2014*

# Sharpen up those newsletters

Church newsletters have the potential to be one of your most valuable pieces of church communication – so why are so many so much less than they could be? Falling somewhere between a labour of love and a bad headache for the overworked office administrator or church secretary, they can convey a sense of desperation. The good news? Turning them around can be simple – it just takes a bit of forward planning.

## Before you change anything/launch your newsletter ask yourself:

- Who are your readers? Internal? External?
- How does your newsletter reach these readers – is it picked up from church, or delivered door-to-door by volunteers?
- Do you charge?
- Should you consider sponsorship/advertising from businesses located in the community?

## Common problems

- Weak content, generally as a result of panic and poor planning – deadline day passes and all the editor has in is the flower rota and the minister's letter
- Poor production standards: Pages that aren't proofread, paragraphs printed twice, missing headlines... you imagine it, it happens
- Terrible pictures: Dark, blurred, unpeopled or photobooth mugshots, no captions
- 'In with the in-crowd' editorial: in-jokes, jargon, acronyms and first names, guaranteeing you will alienate all but your closest insiders.  
(See the example below).



## **Season of Invitation**

*Members of the welcome committee invite you to bring along a friend to any of the special Season of Invitation events being planned this autumn. The first event – BTCS – happens in a fortnight. For more information, please see Bob, Jenny or Pauline.*

What is the Season of invitation? And, come to that, BTCS? What date is it taking place? Why should we invite friends? And who are Bob, Jenny and Pauline?

### **Getting it right – 10 planning tips**

1. If possible, gather an editorial team (or at least a couple of occasional helpers) together to work on the newsletter
2. Periodically, get your team or helpers to review at least a few months' worth of editions: What worked? What didn't?
3. List elements that must always be included – diary page, minister's letter etc
4. Review other newsletters to see what they are covering and how much space they are giving to any one topic
5. Think about your church audience – churches are obviously very different from each other – what is the make-up of your congregation? How can you appeal to your different internal groups?
6. Think about your external audiences – church visitors, community groups, local press and others on your mailing list. Can you connect with them without losing touch with your key audience of church readers?
7. Work out how many words will fit a page (probably A5 or A4) in your chosen typeface and plan articles accordingly
8. Make a flat plan (that's a sheet of paper where each page of your newsletter is represented by a rectangle, with pages drawn in pairs so you can see facing pages at a glance)
9. Commission articles – giving word-count, guidelines and a deadline (earlier than you need it, but don't tell them)
10. If you change copy, work with the author if at all possible.

## Designing the newsletter

- Keep things clean and simple: even if you don't have the resources for much beyond a print-out of text, you can ensure your newsletter is attractive and readable.
- Ensure your cover or front page is as eye-catching as possible – this means a strong masthead (the way your title looks, permanently, each month), attractive graphics and image, if used, and as little copy as you can get away with
- Create clear headings and sections
- Be consistent with typefaces (less is most definitely more!)
- Choose a few clear, active, close-up photos – not too many to a page
- Be careful with colours if your newsletter is in colour – choose just one or two from a matching palette
- White space is your friend – don't overload your pages

## And don't forget:

Put a PDF of your newsletter on your website. Blog, Facebook and/or tweet when each new edition comes out (and announce it in church!). We recommend that you check that all those with contact details included in the newsletter are happy for their details to be available online. Obviously there needs to be Church contact info available!

## Content pick 'n' mix

There are some obvious things to include in a church newsletter, as well as many 'nice to have' extras. Keep hold of and add to these lists, for reference and inspiration!

### Must haves?

- Cover/name
- Minister's letter
- List of church contacts/who's who (including editor)
- Submission details: copy deadline, guidelines etc and note of encouragement to would-be contributors
- Diary/events notices (include clear instructions re contact people,

numbers, dates, times, venue, crèche where applicable etc – no assumed knowledge!)

- Forthcoming elder elections etc (include explanation of the roles/ how to nominate someone/stand etc)
- Various reports (try to keep them short and snappy!) eg:
- Church Meeting and church initiative reports
- Reports from the different groups (e.g. worship group, eco group, user group?)
- Appeals – for volunteers, funds etc
- Link to church website, if you have one, where much more information can be found
- Personal reflections, comments, poems etc contributed by readers.

### **Things to include, depending on your context and resources:**

- Explore forthcoming issues/debates for the church
- Personal profiles – oldest member, youngest family, member with a mission – whatever!
- New members' section – welcome with a small biography and photo
- Mini Q&A for newcomers/visitors? (Changing questions each issue?)
- Welcome blurb for possible newcomers or casual readers?
- Mini briefings on URC – history, values etc
- Mini briefings showing character/values of your church – e.g. its ministry to homeless people; its singles club; its unusual approach to worship?
- More names! People love to read about themselves or people they know! But use the full name and reference so you don't exclude outsiders
- Community news and features – for those with wider circulation/ more funds.

## **Resources**

You are not on your own; there are lots of websites that can help:

- [www.parishpump.co.uk](http://www.parishpump.co.uk)
- [www.parishmagprinters.co.uk](http://www.parishmagprinters.co.uk)
- The Association of Church Editors (ACE) offers a forum and also has meetings. [www.churchmag.uk](http://www.churchmag.uk)

# Making the most of email newsletters

Depending on what kind of format you have in mind, much of the advice in the previous section may apply to the planning, content and production of an email newsletter. However there are some key things to bear in mind when producing an e-bulletin.

1. An e-newsletter can mean anything from a simple email containing a bit of news, to a properly-designed publication in electronic format.
2. To keep things simple but professional-looking, find a template and stick to it. You can get free e-newsletter templates from Microsoft (among many others) online at: <http://office.microsoft.com/en-001/templates/email-newsletter-TC103462871.aspx>
3. Most templates are easy to manipulate. For each edition you can simply import new text and pictures into the grids/boxes provided, and resize them to create variety.
4. E-newsletters are generally much shorter than their print equivalents – up to around 1000 words in total – to cater for shorter online attention spans. Make each sentence, paragraph and story short and sweet.
5. Try to ensure most stories are of direct interest to most readers – and put the more important stories at the top of the email/e-newsletter. Web readers won't scroll down if their interest is not immediately grabbed – they will just click to the next email.
6. If you have a large, diverse readership – e.g. including local residents and church-building user-groups – consider segmenting your e-newsletter mailings so that different elements of content go to different mailing lists. An email management system like <http://mailchimp.com> can help.



7. Seek permission from potential readers before taking their email details from the church family directory (or anywhere else) and pasting them into your mailing list. They may not wish to subscribe!
8. Build up your mailing list further by:
  - Including a prominent 'subscribe to our newsletter' tab on the church website;
  - Adding the church website address to all materials – from leaflets and letterheads to notice boards.
  - Adding 'subscribe' tabs to the newsletter itself, for the benefit of non regular readers.
9. Issue other calls to action using hyperlinks. For example, with one click, readers can register for the Quiz Night; join the kitchen rota or sign up for the Church weekend away. But, make sure the link directs respondents to an agreed, relevant contact email address, or you could be left with the task of managing the data yourself! Microsoft's website (<http://bit.ly/1scrkcd>) shows you how to make hyperlinks. Or you can search online for free tools enabling different web actions.
10. As in print newsletters, invite contributions giving the editor's contact details.
11. Include contact links 'for more information' wherever applicable. Always ensure contributors and other contacts are happy to have their details included in a medium with potentially a far wider reach than a paper newsletter.
12. To nip any formatting or other problems in the bud, email yourself and a friend a test copy of each edition before sending your e-newsletter far and wide.



# Leaflets that pack a punch

While effective leaflets have some things in common with great newsletters – clean design, strong images, and engaging editorial to name the obvious ones – they serve a distinctive purpose, generally having only one or two key messages to convey and no readership base to rely on. As a result they need real impact and immediacy for their message to stand any chance of hitting home before they are by-passed or binned.

## Leaflet lessons

1. Keep them short and simple
2. Only include four elements:
  - an attention-grabbing headline
  - a strong image or graphic
  - a small amount of active, positive text – bullet points are fine
  - a clear call to action
3. Put your leaflet on the floor, stand back and glance at it. Can you (a) easily read the headline and (b) get from your headline the main message of the leaflet? If not, make the headline better/bigger
4. Get hold of good pictures, without spending a fortune – your own, or free/cheap sites like [fotolia.com](http://fotolia.com), or [flickr.com](http://flickr.com)
5. Don't forget to caption your photos. After the headline, photo captions may be one of the most read pieces of text in your leaflet
6. Draw attention to your call to action, leaving enough space to make it stand out. Something simple like: 'Get your ticket on the door' should be easy for readers to see.

7. Think big and bold: Big headlines get more attention. Big photographs have more impact. White space makes text easy to read. Keep a tight limit on your word count – fewer words will mean a bolder design and more words actually getting read.
  
8. Don't be tempted to include a prominent church logo on your first page – it will dilute your message and alienate those who are not familiar with your church.



# A short note about logos

Don't get uptight worrying about whether your church logo, if you have one, is contemporary, creative or striking enough. But do make sure your members are happy with what this (hopefully) simple graphic seems to be saying about the church. Does it capture a sense of what people think your church stands for? What message does it convey to outsiders?

If you are tempted to modernise your logo, or to develop one for the first time, it could be a fun, even an inspiring experience to get your members engaged with. But one word of caution: don't get swept along into creating an exciting, idealistic or radical-looking logo if the reality of your church culture doesn't match it. Your logo must convey your culture – at its best perhaps, but not the other way around.

More practically-speaking, logos must be versatile. Make sure it looks as good blown up on your noticeboard as it does in miniature on your letterhead. Make sure it works in colour as well as in black and white – and in print as well as on your website.

# Church signs and noticeboards

Your main church sign, usually adjoining or part of a permanent noticeboard – and the space in which it is located – creates a first impression of your church. Full stop.

It's one of the few things that act as a permanent presence for your church in your community, indicating to the passer-by whether the church is dead or alive. If it looks tatty or is hard to read, it inevitably sends out negative messages. In general, church noticeboards are in poor shape, and that's a shame, not least because it reflects very badly on the Church.

## Basic tips

- Church signs last for several years and need to be easily updatable as people, phone numbers and email addresses change
- Use high-quality materials – they need to be built to last
- Avoid jargon

## Who is your noticeboard for?

- What type of sign will you need?
- Who will see it?
- Audit your site; approach the church from different directions – think about who passes it? Pedestrians, motorists, bus passengers? People at the bus stop?
- Aim the sign at the predominant viewer

## What do you want to say?

- First, draft everything you want to be permanently conveyed on an A4 sheet – church name, logo, welcome message, service times, contact details, your website address
- Do you want to name the minister? If you do, just use the name and title, without listing qualifications – the Revd Constance Coltman is enough
- Seek feedback – take your draft to the elders' meeting/communications group
- Less is more! Edit and edit again – don't waste words
- Use language that is understood by everyone
- Many external noticeboards include glass-covered spaces for posters and other notices. Keep these fresh and up-to-date – empty poster cases, or those filled with yellowing notes create a truly awful impression of your church
- If your sign doesn't include poster or other notice space, it is particularly important to make your website address stand out. You could also add a line: 'Contact church offices for details of other activities' or similar
- Where church signs don't include poster/notice space many churches erect separate noticeboards to stand alongside them
- Either way, make sure you also have a clear, welcoming and well-maintained noticeboard in your foyer. Just by ensuring messages, posters, leaflets etc are fresh, up-to-date and pinned to a board in an orderly manner gives an impression of a church that is alive, caring and cared-for.

## Designing your church sign

- Once you have the information agreed, start playing around with layout
- Choose bold typefaces
- Use your church logo if you have one and maybe the URC logo if you like it  
<http://www.urc.org.uk/urc-logo.html>



- Think about ease of reading. Use contrasting colours, blue on white looks good, as can a dark background with gold type (if it fits in with the image you want)
- Decide whether to include space for posters, as detailed above.
- Keep the board in sympathy with its surroundings.

## **Don't be cheap**

- Allow sufficient budget; be prepared to spend several hundred pounds on the initial sign and installation
- It's cheaper to invest, and then maintain, a good quality sign than to keep replacing a poor quality one when it falls apart. Not replacing a sign when it has fallen apart, should not be an option!

## **Consult the experts**

- Get quotes from several sign writers; visit or have in-depth conversations with several. Some companies specialise in church signs (see church press) or you could use a local sign writer (good witness opportunity)
- The sign writer will advise on materials that are vandal and weather proof.

## **Planning permission**

- Consult your local authority for advice and to check that you can position the board where you want it.

## **The last word**

- Clean your board regularly!

This booklet is part of a series on church communications published by the communications department of The United Reformed Church. Titles currently available are:

- **Dealing with the media**
- **Church print and publications**
- **Social media guidelines for the United Reformed Church.**

© United Reformed Church/Gill Nichol/Kay Parris 2014

Published by the communications department of The United Reformed Church.  
United Reformed Church House, 86 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT  
T: 020 7916 2020

ISBN 978-0-85346-304-7



ISBN: 978-0-85346-304-7