

Paper C2

URC Communications strategy 2023-2025

Andy Jackson, Head of Communications

Introduction

This paper brings together my observations after four years in the role of Head of Communications along with proposals for the communication needs of the URC at local, Synod and national levels.

The United Reformed Church is wrestling with significant and continuing changes in society, which have to be factored into the thinking and planning for developing communications.

The UK population has grown; 30% of the population is under 25 and 18% are now 65 and above. A more open and liberal society is making it acceptable to abandon traditional social values relating to marriage, family, gender, sexual orientation and other related issues. Society is becoming increasingly secular, with greater emphasis on consumerism, sport, leisure, entertainment, lifestyle, well-being, and individuality.

The move away from religion is reflected in the declining membership of the different Christian denominations, including the United Reformed Church.

Politicians and the media are increasingly driving the debate around important moral, ethical and behavioural issues – this was once seen as mainly the preserve of the Church.

The impact of digital technology on everyday life and work has been dramatic and continuous. There has been a revolution in choice, availability and range of communication channels and media.

Operating professionally and responsibly, managing budgets effectively and delivering value and results have never been more scrutinised in the charity and not-for-profit sectors. This relentless pace of change experienced in the last 25 years is not slowing down and the Church needs to be more flexible, and fleet of foot in the way it delivers on its mission.

Organisationally it is the role of the Church House communications team to assist the United Reformed Church in meeting its vision and objectives as defined by the General Assembly and Assembly Executive year-on-year.

The team has goals and a work plan, but this is not comprehensively set out in one annual document. At present, communications and publications do not have a strategy or plan that is focused on achieving set goals in support of the Church House team and the wider Church. The work is reactive and in response to directives and the various needs of churches.

Before Covid-19, I had started to free the team from unnecessary processes and bureaucracy and had started to reshape the team to include a greater digital element.

The team delivered an outstanding and continuous set of resources during 2020 and 2021, which showed it was agile and quick to deliver much-needed online and physical resources.

Last year, the 50th anniversary of the URC dominated the workload, but again the team showed what it could deliver, despite the pandemic causing issues for the URC at all levels.

Now is the time to take stock and look forward to the next few years in the life and mission of the URC. There is a need for a new strategic focus and communications plan and the team needs a focus to help deliver the strategy.

Aims

This Communications Strategy aims to provide a strategic focus for the communications department, to enable them to deliver their mandate of promoting effective communication and celebration of the Gospel in and beyond the URC by:

- giving voice to good news
- facilitating regional and national communications
- supporting the communications of Church House departments and General Assembly
- resourcing local churches.

The United Reformed Church has a living Christian faith which is open to all, for all stages and ages in life. We are locally based. It is our mission to proclaim and live out the good news of Jesus who calls us to be active in key social issues and an agent for positive change.

While the URC is smaller than it was, it is still a powerful body of people who can effect real change, in their churches, local communities, regions and nations.

Objectives

1. Knowledge

Know our churches – information is knowledge and knowledge gives us the ability to support our churches and in turn, empower them to communicate better. We cannot support local churches if we don't know them well. By undertaking research, we can produce a range of easy to use and quick to complete toolkits for churches depending on their situations.

By 2025 we will...

Ensure that the team has access to a communications profile of every URC church, including:

- membership, geography, worship style, lay leadership, services, attendance, local community, and demographics. It would work with ministers, local leaders and Synods to build a profile including strengths, weaknesses, goals, and ambitions.

This would pick up on work already going on in Synods rather than duplicating it.

- We will hold this information in our standard CRM database so that Church House and Synod colleagues have access to the data.
- We will work with ministers and Synods to ensure that, where relevant, local profiles and census information are also saved in the database or similar shared, central, system.

Use this information to continue to plan all our communication outputs to best support churches.

Have built a clear understanding in all URC departments of the way the Communications Team can support their development and execution of their objectives.

- We will create a clear induction / 'how we are & how we can help' process
- We will continue to build good relationships with all departments and structures
- We will work towards all Synods having an advocate to help with communications resources
- We will work to produce a series of toolkits that are easy to use and take little time to implement, bearing in mind the amount of volunteer capacity local churches now have.

2. Resources

Resource your local churches – our remit is to support the local church to show the URC's relevance in the lives of communities, church members, local people and their families and show how they can express their faith and participate in their local church.

By 2025 we will

Ensure local churches are resourced by providing:

- Instant-to-use posters/digital content as part of national campaigns
- Templates for creating publicity material
- Thought leadership literature on issues of the day giving a United Reformed perspective
- Video and audio content that supports their day-to-day work
- Communications and media-training, including crisis communications training.
- Support with digital channels via iChurch
- Communications strategy and planning
- Communications technology and software training
- Branding guidance and usage: noticeboards, websites, magazines and newsletters, social media, working with the media (print, radio, and broadcast), writing for the web, photography and video, effective design, presentation skills, issues and crisis management
- Reports of what other local churches are doing – sharing best practice
- Greater access and promotion of *Digest in Reform* to showing the relevance of the URC in the lives of communities
- A hub with content for newsletter and magazine editors to use.

3. Awareness

We exist to raise awareness, knowledge and understanding of the United Reformed Church. As a focus of its purpose, goals and values, the following unique selling point (USP) was created:

The United Reformed Church has a living Christian faith which is open to all, for all stages and ages in life. We are locally based. It is our mission to proclaim and live out the good news of Jesus who calls us to be active in key social issues and an agent for positive change.

This is not meant to be a new strapline for the URC, but something to use as a focus for our work. All are welcome to use it if and when needed.

By 2025 we will:

Ensure the URC's key policy areas are known and understood

- We will build a network of trained, media-savvy spokespeople that represent the URC
- We will ensure that our Synods are included and represented in this network.

Ensure that the URC is a 'go-to' church for comment.

- We will build a network of key media contacts, and relationships with journalists and social media influencers in the Christian and secular media that shows the diversity of the church.

Create a systematic way of providing:

- Theologically balanced output
- Reactive media: responding to key stories that the URC has a view/opinion on
- Proactive media: creating relevant stories and content to push out
- Planned media: including the key moments of Lent, Easter etc.

The communications environment

<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and accessible, mobile-optimised website. • URC wants to be an agent for positive social change, eg JPIT, actions by the Moderator of General Assembly, and Commitment for Life. • Very active social media. • Fast responses to media requests and national stories needing a response from the URC (eg the death of the Queen). • <i>Reform</i> magazine; long-standing attachment to this in many local churches, and shared nationally. • Radio Stations like UCB initiate contact with us due to solid relationships. • Local churches create good news stories for us through their mission. • Breadth of passions within the Church. • We can disagree well. • We're unafraid to apply the Bible to modern context. 	<p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current team goals do not include digital elements. • All churches, regardless of denomination, can be slow to change. • Not a clear understanding of the profile of all local churches. • Tendency to be more reactive than proactive with communications. • Inability to articulate URC difference. • Not a clear, shared, visual identity. • Our language can be quite 'churchy' at times. • The gap between local churches and the national communications team. Sometimes the 'them and us' attitude is a barrier, which, if broken down, would allow many local churches to benefit from the huge array of resources the communications team delivers. • Diversity of opinion; difficult for the church to speak with one voice on
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusivity in our ministers. • All positions open to everyone. • Listen to the local churches, bottom-up decision making. 	<p>things.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be tricky to make decisions. • Cleared shared voice not always clear. • Externally – quite a bit of uncertainty about who the URC is. • Difficult to get a new generation of people in.
<p>Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To use social moments eg warm spaces and Community Project Award winners as regular opportunities to show the church in action. • To use occasional and extraordinary events to also show the church in action, eg the church’s response to those who have fled Ukraine. • To promote the ways for churches to feedback to the team. • For every communication to have a clear purpose. • To use social media appropriately. • To create a bank of URC spokespeople to enable proactive media comment/coverage; regionally too. • The Church Life Review. • To use faith journey stories to show impact of URC church community. • To use Ministry Enquirers in same way. • More podcasts and video content. • The young nature of the church. • Use our amazing partnerships more. • Celebrating success (eg financial benefit of Commitment for Life partnership). • Collaborate with other departments at early stage of projects. • Build understanding of what good looks like with other departments. • Tailoring information to different audiences via different social channels. • Having a clear journey for all comms. • Share the resources we have. • Could we use ecumenical partners more? • Do we use our ecumenical heart? 	<p>Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ageing demographic in the URC. • Numbers in decline 192,000 members in 1972, 40,000 now. • A lack of a cohesive communications strategy. • Trying to do too much across too many channels with little or no return. • Analytics, such as the number of times a document has been downloaded from the website, not being used to make data-driven decisions. There’s little point repeating a resource if only seven people have downloaded it in 12 months. • Generational fear of failure. We used to get shouted at, at work or school if we did something wrong. With the advent of digital working, this no longer happens. • Those people who are unwilling to change. • Struggling to appeal to a younger demographic. • Being able to use our buildings and spaces and resources for community purpose. • Limitations in staff. • Less age diversity in committees. • Ministers and Elders in local churches are overstretched; no time to think about communications. • People taking on many more roles. • Inequality of funding across Synods. • Digital comms is not a priority for churches; other priorities like keeping church open. • Financial strictures we work under during costs of living crisis. • Too much dilution with all the different social media channels.

Communications competitor analysis

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Church of England	More holistic campaigns for key moments of the year, eg Dust and Glory for Lent and Easter 2023, and Follow the Star for Christmas 2022, but The Great Invitation was too churchy for non-CofE and secular audiences.
Methodist Church	Huge exposure on BBC Radio; training for website and social media, the recent set of dedicated resources to help churches with their digital content.
Baptist Union	Better use of images on its website, books aimed at children and infants around key events/Bible stories. Forest church.
The Catholic Church – Bishops’ Conference in England and Wales	Embedded podcasts on its website.
Moravian Church UK	Well-designed website let down by graphics from other areas below the eye line of the home page.
United Methodist Church	Internal adverts treated as external and too prominent (above main hero banner, repeated multiple times throughout home page).
Mothers’ Union	Excellent use of thematic graphics across web and social media.
Life Church	Contemporary services – modern/live music, live service links, childcare during services with TVs for parents and carers to view the service, drinks and food at the start/during/end of service, community projects.
Church of Scotland	Excellent media resources area on its website.

Key moments

These are current and proposed priorities for communicating throughout each year:

- Mothering Sunday
- Synods Spring and Autumn meetings and special events
- Other events from the URC Prayer Handbook, Worship Book and Diary
- General Assembly
- New Year
- Father’s Day
- Remembrance Day
- Greenbelt
- Black History Month
- September – new academic year
- Advent
- Christmas
- Lent and Easter
- Pentecost
- Earth Day (April)
- Disability Awareness Day (July)

Resources

Head of Communications

Andy Jackson

Senior managers

Sara Foyle, Lead Graphic Designer (full time)

Steve Tomkins, Editor of Reform (full time)

Ann-Marie Nye, Communications Officer, (full time)

Team members

Chris Andrews, Graphics Designer (full time, Reform 50% and URC 50%)

Louise Ault, Team Administrator and *Reform* Subscriptions (full time)

Hannah Clark, Digital Content Assistant – Daily Devotions and video content (part time, three days a week)

Simon Pickard, Bookshop Despatch Clerk (two days a week, Church House caretaker rest of the time)

Laura Taylor, Graphics Designer (full time)

Laurence Wareing, Content Editor, Reform (part time)

Neil Hunter, Digital Content Editor, three days a week.

All teams can be helped by temporary staff if needed.

The iChurch website platform for local churches is helped by two freelance contractors, Dan Morrell and Reuben Watt. There was a staff member, but they left in 2022 and will not be replaced.

Communications channels

Channel	Activity	New or established?
Website	Daily updates on several pages and specialist areas	Established, 102,000 pages views per month on average
Facebook	Daily updates, three times a day on various subjects	8,300 people reached each month on average
Twitter	Daily updates and Retweets, such as JPIT content	18,100 impressions in January, 20K average monthly reach
Instagram	Daily updates	3,900 average reach per month
LinkedIn	Daily updates	Not available at time of writing
TikTok	Films about Daily readings, unboxing content, magazine flick thoughts for Reform, other specialist content	New, began in November 2022, reach of 1840 since then. Similar to Instagram and other social media channels, this will take time

		to build up.
YouTube	Weekly videos on average	760 hours of videos watched in 2022, 12,000 views
NU	Monthly email	12,404 emails each month
<i>Reform</i> magazine	10 x year	4,000 magazines sent to 1,768 recipients including church distributors who take delivery of the magazine and pass them to others. Reach is estimated to be 8,000.
Podcasts	Two series to date, with plans to expand this ever-expanding audio programme channel	We will work with those with established podcast series to develop the URC's podcast output to reach a wider audience.

Culture and ambition

There can sometime be an assumption among our local churches that because we are a church, it is too hard to provide high-quality communications. There is no reason for this to be the case at all, and our team exists to help share the good news.

We want to encourage all in the URC to be ambitious, and user focused – for example, do the noticeboards inside and outside your church tell people about why the church exists, what it offers, and how to find out more?

Do the external and internal noticeboards join up, and are those who volunteer to welcome people into get training to deal with all who might come to a service – people who have never been to church, those who are returning after time away from church, those who are new to the area, those who have decided to try the URC because they liked what was on the noticeboard, local or national website or social media channel?



The research detailed in Section 1, above, will help the Communications Team deliver tailor-made toolkits for local churches.

The Committee also wants to establish a network of volunteer Communications Advocates in each Synod, where there isn't already a volunteer or member of staff who looks after Communications, who can be an informal link between the Communications Team, resources available, local churches and the Synod, with expertise in

communications, who can identify needs, offer resources, solutions, and other assistance, in conjunction with the Communications Team.

Our audiences

Existing audiences

- URC Members
- Local Church Meeting
- Local Elder Meeting
- Ministers
- Synods
- Assembly Executive
- General Assembly, its committees and advisory groups.

Audiences outside the URC, for example:

- Potential URC Members
- Online worship followers
- Individuals confined to the home
- Users of URC buildings
- Local population physically near a URC Church
 - Families
 - Young people
- Local Ecumenical Partnerships
- Secular decision makers (eg MPs drafting policy).

Key messages

The URC has some critical 'USPs' that we can build on to enable our distinctiveness to stand out in our communications, whether verbal, online or in print. Such as:

The United Reformed Church has a living Christian faith which is open to all, for all stages and ages in life. We are locally based. It is our mission to proclaim and live out the good news of Jesus who calls us to be active in key social issues and an agent for positive change.

Accessible language

There needs to be a clear expression of what the United Reformed Church is, its purpose and calling and what it offers people. And this should be communicated in accessible and inclusive language – more tabloid than broadsheet, more *Radio Times* than *The Tablet*.

The Church of England realised this when engaging with society at large rather than die-hard parishioners.

Language should avoid unnecessary jargon, If you are new to Christianity or the URC, it can be a barrier to understanding and off-putting. It assumes a level of knowledge and unhelpfully implies exclusivity rather than inclusivity.

The URC is open to all. Getting this right will help people understand what is special, different, and relevant about the URC and how it relates to them, and they to it.

Benefits

- Everyone will know the Church's core objective and its strategic goals and communications will help achieve the core objective and goals.
- The role and purpose of the communications team will be clearer.
- There will be a more efficient and effective use of resources.
- These will work to sustain and grow membership and church attendance. People like to be part of something that reflects their beliefs and values and is relevant in today's society.
- It is important for the United Reformed Church to be seen to have a relevant voice and role in creating good in the UK and worldwide.
- The local church is genuinely at the heart of this grassroots movement, and it is this which differentiates the URC, its engagement with the community, the involvement of lay leadership and its open welcome to all.

At the time of going to press, there were a number of resolutions relating to this area, and we will work, as always, to update our House Style, and to produce new resources when needed.

Brand continuity

The Design and Digital Visual Identity is attached as an appendix to this paper. We ask all who produce resources for the URC at all levels to follow these guidelines to ensure quality and consistency.

Examples of joined up branding and resources

- Cancer Research: <https://master.d1wflxy3hgj9gv.amplifyapp.com/>
- Macmillan: <http://portacreativeserver.com/vault/manualescorporativos/BRANDBOOK%20MACMILLAN.pdf>
- The Church of England: <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/media-centre/logo-and-visual-identity>
- Coca Cola: <https://issuu.com/zakaz4ik/docs/styleguide-coca-cola>

We have helped dozens of churches and other URC groups with their branding, but if we are to make an impact in the same way that other brands do, tighter guidance and acceptance that media professionals should be producing materials, not someone using Canva, WordArt or Publisher.

Consistency and personality need to be evident in all that we do, especially in communicating to key audiences. Members should feel proud to be counted as URC or as a URC member in an LEP as their faith is presented as modern and relevant in today's world.

Tactics

Audience	Objective	Message	Channel
Secular decision makers	To raise awareness of the unique nature of the URC / its role in a particular social action debate.	URC/General Assembly believes X on issue Y.	Proactive media work via list of key spokespeople.
Individuals living near a URC Church	To let them know they are welcome in the church.	You're welcome in our church.	Poster Local media Local social media.
Staff in different URC departments	To remind them that the Communications team can support their delivery of objectives. To encourage them to create a consistent visual and verbal representation of the URC.	We can help your product / project be more successful if we work with you from the outset. Awareness of the URC, and understanding of what we are about, will be stronger when we show a consistent brand externally.	Regular internal communication and staff meetings between teams. Provision of, and support in using, the Design and Digital Visual Identity.

How are we going to achieve this?

1. Knowledge

Research by the Communications Team with an external researcher or company to build a profile of every URC.

- a) This could include creating a process for the Communications Team to input insights about local churches and their communications skills and needs into the URC database, and to review and update this on a regular basis.
- b) Use this information to plan communication toolkits and other resources to best support churches.

2. Resources

- a) Ensure local churches are offered resources.
- b) Review what resources exist already, produced by the URC or its ecumenical partners
- c) Ensure that all local churches are aware of these
- d) Evaluate the success of existing resources and update them as and when needed.

3. Awareness

- a) Ensure the URC's key policy areas are known and understood by decision-makers
- b) Continue to build the list of spokespeople and their specialist areas (e.g. Kevin Snyman, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories) and work with General Assembly Committees to understand the URC's thinking on key areas. This thinking to be easily available on the website
- c) Develop the What We Believe area of the website with Faith and Order offering snapshots of what the Church believes as well as fuller resources (eg **<https://urc.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-believe/>**)
- d) Set up contact lists with journalists who specialise in those areas (eg Damian Carrington is an environment editor at *The Guardian*).

Ensure that the URC is a 'go-to' church for comment.

- a) Develop the existing media contacts and journalists lists
- b) Create communication plans with relevant URC departments for the key moments
- c) Share the reach from planned media coverage.