

Paper A11

Future of *Reform*

Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Victoria James victoria.james@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 13 General Assembly instructs the Chief Operating Officer and the Resources Committee to manage the future of <i>Reform</i> from August 2024 onwards by: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. continuing with <i>Reform</i> magazine, unchanged but requiring annual subsidy of up to £50,000 per annum; or2.a making changes to <i>Reform</i> (through staffing changes and number of issues) such that the magazine is cost neutral before the end of 2024; or2.b making changes to <i>Reform</i> (through staffing changes and number of issues) such that the magazine is cost neutral before the end of 2025; or3. ceasing to publish <i>Reform</i> as a URC communication tool.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To take a decision on any future subsidy of the <i>Reform</i> Magazine.
Main points	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The external review of <i>Reform</i> is to be read in the wider context of the URC budget, and budget strategy agreed at Assembly Executive in November 2024.2. The review indicates that <i>Reform</i> magazine has a place within the existing Communications Strategy, but the magazine cannot continue unchanged without subsidy.3. General Assembly is to decide the extent of the change it seeks in the light of the overall budget deficit.
Previous relevant documents	Communications Paper to GA 2020 and subsequently Resolution 35 from GA 2020. Paper G2 Budget Strategy for 2025 onwards (Assembly Executive Nov 23) Paper G1 General Assembly Budget (Assembly Executive Nov 23).
Consultation has taken place with...	As detailed in Appendix 1.

Summary of impact

Financial	The different options have a financial impact in so far as the subsidy of <i>Reform</i> is relevant to the budget savings which Assembly Executive sought in November 2023.
External (eg ecumenical)	None specific.

1. Background

- 1.1 In 2020, General Assembly received a paper from the Communications Committee which included the summary of subsidy General Assembly / Mission Council had previously given to *Reform*.
- 1.2 At General Assembly in 2020, the following resolutions were passed:
- a) Mission Council recognises the contribution of *Reform* to the life and work of the United Reformed Church and notes the commitment of the Communications Committee and staff team to continue its growth and development over the five-year period from January 2021 to December 2025, a period that includes the 50th anniversary of the URC and the magazine.
 - b) Mission Council acknowledges with thanks the work of the *Reform* team and the wider Communications Team in making savings and reducing the financial cost to the Church, and endorses the further changes outlined in the report. 6 of 70 United Reformed Church – Record of General Assembly, July 2020 General Assembly.
 - c) Acting on behalf of General Assembly, and noting the decision in March 2020 by the Officers of Assembly to support *Reform* in 2021, Mission Council resolves to support *Reform* over the subsequent four year period to December 2025 by continuing with a reduced annual subsidy, not to exceed £50,000 annually, and asks the Communications Committee to make regular reports to Mission Council.
- 1.3 In the light of the budget situation and the decisions taken by Assembly Executive in November 2023 about the approach to addressing the deficit, Business Committee felt it was appropriate to instigate a review of *Reform* to address the question of the subsidy of the *Reform* magazine.
- 1.4 An independent communications consultant was instructed by Business Committee to carry out a review of *Reform*. In doing so, she worked with Jane Humphries who is a member of Finance Committee and Peter Knowles, a former Convenor of the Communications Committee. The report is provided in full in Appendix 1.

2. The current and future status of *Reform*

- 2.1 The review indicates that *Reform* has a place within the current Communications strategy and it sits alongside News Update, social media and the website as our current modes of communication. The review also indicates that the *Reform* magazine should revert to being a magazine for the URC rather than anything

broader than that. Even if General Assembly were to take option 1 above and continue the subsidy of *Reform* then it should be on the basis of this change.

- 2.2 General Assembly would need to decide whether option 1 is an appropriate route to take in the light of the budget deficit. Similarly, in considering option 3, General Assembly needs to decide whether it wishes to continue have *Reform* magazine a mode of communication through 2024 and beyond.
- 2.3 Option 2a and 2b provide the middle ground. Both these options would necessitate change both in terms of staffing and subscriptions. Option 2a honours the previous decision to subsidise until 2025 but the deficit position was not as stark as it now is when that decision was made and therefore option 2b is offered as a way of supporting *Reform* moving forward to taking into our current financial position.

Appendix one

Reform: 2024 General Assembly

External reflections and recommendations for General Assembly 2024

Background

Victoria James, Chief Operating Officer of the URC, on behalf of Business Committee, asked me to act as an external communications consultant looking at *Reform* as part of her preparation for the GA 2024.

This follows my initial work with the URC Communications team, helping them to produce the Communications Strategy that was adopted at the GA last year, July 2023.

In November 2023, I also facilitated an away day with the Communications team to workshop how they could deliver the specific resolutions, namely:

- building a communications profile of each local church and Synod
- building toolkits for churches (most exist already, but need collating into a self-service area on URC background)
- creating a network of Communications Advocates.

General Assembly 2023 urged everyone connected to the Church to read *Reform*, but didn't specifically urge them to subscribe. Victoria and the Business Committee asked me to consider the following questions in the light of the current subsidy of *Reform* being due to run out in 2025.

Process

I undertook desk research including conversations with:

- Victoria James, URC Chief Operating Officer
- Steve Tomkins, *Reform* editor
- Andy Jackson, URC Head of Communications
- Chris Andrews, URC Designer
- Laurence Wareing, URC Content Editor
- Peter Knowles, former Convenor of the Communications Committee.

Ann-Marie Nye, Communications officer provided very helpful stats on digital engagement. Jane Humphries' finance data was very informative too. I also reviewed the results of the last Reform readership survey in 2019.

Questions from the Business Committee and my reflections on them

Over the last five years how has the magazine grown and developed?

Editorial

It's worth reminding ourselves that the purpose of *Reform* is recorded as follows:

The Assembly INSTRUCTS THE PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE, when established to proceed with the publication of a magazine to be called '*Reform*' which shall be the official journal of the United Reformed Church, and with the publication of a Yearbook and Handbook.

Reform is as old as the URC itself, entwined with its history.

Over the last five years the Editor, Steve, has worked hard to ensure that *Reform* is valued as a magazine that connects across the URC and encourages its readership to engage with issues outside the church. He has also intentionally drawn a breadth of contributors together to ensure that the spectrum of theology across the URC is included.

More than one interviewee reflected that *Reform* under Steve as Editor does a great job in bringing members and leaders together in one place for reflection and debate, in a church where it is often the case that leaders are more 'radical left' than conservative members.

There is quite a lot of anecdotal evidence that *Reform* is valued as a quality magazine that is the envy of other denominations that no longer have one, especially when it tackles topical issues such as the Ukraine / Russia conflict.

The sense from my interviews and research is that *Reform* holds a unique position as a magazine that can connect the URC across the geographic and theological spread within the UK.

It is clearly a magazine for the URC. Both Steve and his colleagues described how efforts to make it a broader Christian magazine in previous years were not successful, but one that encourages the readership to look outward and consider how their faith impacts the world.

Design

The design is iterated year on year, such that the current design does look more refreshed than five years ago, but no significant changes have been made since Steve rethought the whole concept of *Reform* upon taking up editorship in 2013.

Numerically

Since the GA23 resolution, the Head of Communications has pushed the marketing of *Reform* hard, which has seen an increase in numbers, see table (full set at the end of paper).

This is after a consistent period of decline.

Reform subscribers 2012-2023

Month	No	Readership	Change	%	Church membership	Notes
Sep-18	3,148	10,074	-275	-8%		Possible that office copies were included.
Sep-19	3,541	11,331	393	12%		Possible that office copies were included.
Sep-20	3,234	10,349	-307	-9%		Possible that office copies were included.
Sep-21	2,896	9,267	-338	-10%		Possible that office copies were included.
Jan-22	2,576	8,243	-320	-11%		Possible that office copies were included.
Jan-23	1,587	5,078	-989	-38%		
Feb-24	1,764	5,645	177	11%	41,786	New rules about LEP numbers, lots of marketing in 2023.
Apr-24	2,129					

Andy Jackson, Head of Communications, notes that:

"I noticed that there were times when the subscriptions rose and so I wanted to compare the downward trend over the years to one with a small percentage growth. The strategy behind the 11% growth was to settle the new subscriptions process and to try different marketing techniques, such as the mailing to church officers who don't take *Reform*, to grow subscriptions. This clearly paid off. There is now also a new Direct Debit process following the massive delays caused by HSBC last year to the old process. That has helped create long term subscribers and takes very little time to complete".

Steve also continually 'soft markets' the magazine, by preaching regularly in the South East and beyond. This also serves as a way of him keeping in touch with the current and potential readership.

Reform also has a monthly podcast, and Steve leads writing workshops, speaks at events, posts with the team daily online reports of General Assembly, leads writing workshops and has spoken at events.

The team has worked to give the URC added value on top of the magazine itself, and is currently pondering Reform Live (some events) as the latest addition in that tradition.

Our current readership/subscribers? (not names but demographic traits and motivations, likes and dislikes)

The current readership stands at around 5,600, with a subscriber base of 1,765. The advertising media pack reflects the perception that each copy is read by at least two other people. So, around 13% of the current membership reads the magazine.

The majority of subscribers are members of the URC, although some are members of other churches, and around 50% hold a leadership position within the URC.

With no specific central ministerial email, there may therefore be a specific and essential role for *Reform* as an inspirational channel of communication for this leadership group.

It is safe to say that *Reform* is not a digital product, despite the fact that digital subscription is offered, only 8% subscribe online, the remaining 92% take the print subscription. Of those 92%, there is anecdotal evidence that older, geographically isolated readers enjoy the opportunity to engage with issues from without and outside the church through the magazine. According to the Editor, there are some geographical areas with no take up at all, so there is potential for growth here.

More than one interviewee reflected that *Reform* under Steve as Editor does a great job in bringing members and leaders together in one place for reflection and debate, in a church where it is often the case that leaders are more 'radical left' than conservative members.

For example, Steve described the concerted effort he made with GEAR, the more evangelical wing of the church, to ensure that they were represented within the pages of the magazine and whilst they may not agree with all articles, will have the right of reply.

The editorial team also works hard to ensure that the breadth of demographic spread within the churches in the UK is reflected in the contributors and content in the magazine.

At present, *Digest* (more of a summary of URC news and ministerial moves) is printed as a separate pull out to *Reform*. This is a hangover from when the magazine was aiming to reach beyond the church and be a more generic Christian magazine.

The editorial team wanted to move *Digest* into the main magazine, but the Communications Committee did not want this to happen. The editorial team would like to put it back into the main content now. I think part of it could go in the magazine as 'news', but more functional updates can go in the well read digital URC News.

Outline of trends, costs and projections (this to include the outcome of the recent push post GA 23)?

Jane's finance report crunches the numbers in detail, my additional thoughts are as follows.

The magazine has been on a decline in recent years, and numbers are only now beginning to rise after a concerted effort to increase readership following last year's General Assembly,

With paper magazines traditionally being passed around between families and churches, you will never get 100% of URC members subscribing to *Reform*. However, there is still potential for growth from the current 13% with a consistent and continued push to subscription.

Could there also be an option to buy one off copies of *Reform* at a higher individual cover price?

Costs of print and postage have increased significantly over the past five years, and yet the annual subscription held at £28 for six years until 2024, when it increased marginally to £29.50.

Steve, Editor, is committed to keeping the annual subscription below the £30 bar, which he perceives is key to retaining / recruiting subscribers.

But it is not sustainable to keep producing the magazine with the current subscription / costs. There are options to reduce the number of editions produced as follows:

Reducing from ten editions down to eight would result in £10,000 of savings, reducing to six would result in a saving of £20,000.

But reducing to six editions would likely lead to a reduction in advertising revenue, whereas retaining eight editions would be far less likely to reduce the number of charities looking to advertise as a fundraising channel.

Increasing readership will increase income. There is possibility of small but incremental growth now that the 2023 push has shown some success here.

Staffing is the biggest cost, and making savings here would be the quickest way to cut costs.

However, it is not quite as simple as saying you can remove a staff member to save money. The nuances therefore need to be worked through as part of an all round review of the URC's communication needs.

What would be the impact on *Reform* in the event of no future subsidy and what form would any future publication need to take to be financially viable and self-funding?

The magazine does not seem to be viable without some form of subsidy.

Yes, it would be easy to cut the colour magazine, but what would you lose if you cut it? How else would you communicate across the denomination to an older demographic?

To be self-funding, the magazine would need to cover its costs from subscriptions, so a significant increase in these numbers is needed.

Advertising brings in c£40,000 with regular advertisements - and I recommend only dropping issues down to eight minimum to not lose this loyal group of income generating advertisers.

Reform could in theory be self-funding if it was a digital only product, but in reality you would lose the advertising income, and with the demographic of the church we cannot simply assume that everyone wants to go purely digital for everything and be happy to pay for it.

Although the Editor does not want to increase subscription to more than £30 a year, this option must be considered as part of financial planning. At the very least, the number of editions needs to fall if the subscription costs remain the same.

What does the denomination need as the core communication tools from 2025 onwards?

The denomination needs a suite of communications tools to serve the next five years.

The mandate of the Communications Team is 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 Depts and GA
- resourcing the local church.

Reform does a great job of bringing scattered individuals and congregations together so that they feel they are part of something bigger, and engaged with big ideas together. If produced well, it can tick all of the above boxes.

But it needs to be read by more people if it is to do so properly, so continued uptick in subscription is essential.

It can then exist as part of a suite of resources already approved when the GA2023 approved the Communications Strategy.

- Easy to find toolkits for self service communications at a local level
- The URC website as central host for these
- Local websites provided by iChurch.

In addition, the URC needs to continue to develop its central digital resource.

URC News now reaches over 40% of members, and has a very high open and read rate, and relatively low unsubscribe rate.

It shows that although the demographic of the church is older, digital communication is an essential part of engaging with it.

This does not mean that the church can purely communicate digitally. For inclusivity and practical reasons, there are older members who won't and can't engage that way. And there are younger members who spend their entire working day online and want to engage offline with communications that are for discussion / reflection, which is where a paper *Reform* can stay.

So, it is about being clear about the audience and purpose of each type of communication, eg:

- targeted digital communication for specific roles
- targeted digital channels from the eg children's and youth work team to reach young people
- *Reform* for bringing whole church together and engaging in thoughtful debate
- media content for external media to spread the gospel far and wide
- toolkits to enable local churches to reach outside themselves and with the community.

Does the denomination seek to communicate within itself or have a wider theological / missional / discipling reach beyond the denomination?

The denomination has a clear remit to spread the gospel, for which it simply has to communicate beyond itself. *Reform* as a magazine does serve this purpose, by encouraging and inspiring leaders of the URC to engage with issues outside the church and inspiring them to reach beyond it.

But it was also initially set up to be the official journal and handbook, ie to help the church communicate within itself and to understand itself.

Appendix of useful information

Digital engagement since GA 2023: useful statistics

URC News is produced monthly and goes to 25,000 or around 60% of total URC membership. This is a very high percentage of members, and shows that although *Reform* is not engaged with digitally (with only 8% of subscribers opting for the digital edition against 92% print), members clearly do have email addresses and are willing to use them for URC purposes.

The level of engagement with this email is relatively high, and the level of unsubscribers lower than average at less than 1%.

There was a significant increase in subscribers in February 2024, and whilst there was apparently no specific strategy for recruiting new names, possible reasons for the increase were given as follows, and this is all in the context of the communications team tightening focus.

1. People who were forwarded the campaign decided to subscribe for themselves, because it's a good read.
2. We encouraged people to sign up via social media before the Feb issue was published.
3. We led the February issue with a good human interest story on a topical / national issue, that churches, charities and projects could identify with when Wilsden Trinity Church won its challenge to Barclays bank.
4. We had reported on this story previously when the bank closed the Wilsden's account, so was a good follow up story.
5. As December /January is a double issue, perhaps people, who are forwarded the campaign by others, thought they'd missed a January issue and subscribed for themselves so they didn't miss out on the next issue.
6. Ministries provided us with some new email addresses. As per the report, in December 2023 we had 15,097 NU contacts and in February 2024 this rose to 21,955, a difference of 6,858. Ministries provided us with 822 emails in January and 464 emails in February – a total of 1,286. But that doesn't mean 1,286 was updated.

Eg I've just imported 116 email from Ministries to the NU address book. Out of 116 updated only 42 new emails were added (see screenshot below). This updates the NU address book for May from 25,429 to 25,471. I guess that still leaves 5,572 unaccounted for and I guess they subscribed off their own backs. Which is great!

News Update stats July 2023 – May 2024 [report produced Monday 13 May 2024]

Issue	No of contacts sent campaign	No of unsubscribers	Since first send					Click-to-open rate
			Opens /reopens /shares	Unique opens (new)	Non-openers	Link clicks	Unique link cliques (new)	
May 2024 (sent Fri 10 May)	25,987	34	6,256	3,471	18,896	2,325	479	14%
April 2024	27,198	252	13,386	6,172	16,999	2,780	820	13%
March 2024	28,165	303	10,898	5,407	18,402	3,608	675	12%
Feb 2024	21,955	208	10,937	4,885	12,879	3,152	941	19%
Dec 2023-Jan 2024	15,097	7	12,023	4,431	6,714	3,712	1,443	33%
Nov 2023	15,138	13	11,162	4,167	7,038	2,344	738	18%
Oct 2023	15,131	18	10,299	4,131	7,060	2,289	844	20%
Sept 2023	15,332	26	11,079	2,478	6,801	2,478	884	21%
July/Aug 2023	14,863	20	11,688	4,234	7,332	3,896	800	19%

Important notes

- It's important to note the figure for "emails opened" is the amount tracked by Dotdigital, not necessarily the amount that was actually opened. Reports display the number of campaigns that Dotdigital tracks and registers as being opened by recipients. This is a worst-case scenario, as not all email clients or business email servers necessarily allow emails to be tracked.
- News Update is sent out as an HTML and Plain Text email. Once the images are downloaded for an email (html), an open is registered. In order to register a plain text open, the recipient must select a link.

Opens

The amount of opens, people reopening the campaign and / or forwarding on to other email addresses.

Unique opens

Shows the number of campaigns that Dotdigital tracks and registers as being opened by either a new recipient / or someone opening it just once.

Link clicks

Only the top ten (most opened) links are tracked.

Unique link clicks

As above, registers the unique number of users who've clicked links in a campaign.

Click-to-open rate

Calculated as the total number of unique clicks divided by the total number of unique opens, given as a percentage.

People are also unsubscribing. There also seem to be large numbers that unsubscribed in February, March and April. People would unsubscribe for several reasons, no longer wanting to receive NU or changed role in a church / church closed for example.

Reform numbers

Reform subscribers 2012 - 2023							
Month	No.	Readership	Change	% change	Church membership	Notes	
Sep-12	5,196	16,627				Possible that office copies were included	
Sep-13	5,323	17,034	127	2%	59,077	Possible that office copies were included	
Sep-14	4,580	14,656	-743	-14%		Possible that office copies were included	
Sep-15	4,123	13,194	-457	-10%		Possible that office copies were included	
Sep-16	3,537	11,318	-586	-14%		Possible that office copies were included	
Sep-17	3,423	10,954	-114	-3%		Possible that office copies were included	
Sep-18	3,148	10,074	-275	-8%		Possible that office copies were	

						included	
Sep-19	3,541	11,331	393	12%		Possible that office copies were included	
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Jan-23	1,587	5,078	-989	-38%			
Feb-24	1,764	5,645	177	11%	41,786	New rules about LEP numbers, lots of marketing in 2023	
Oct-24	1,675	5,360				Assumes 5% drop year on year	
Oct-25	1,592	5,094					£50K pa subsidy expires Dec 2025
Oct-26	1,512	4,838					
Oct-27	1,436	4,595					
Oct-28	1,364	4,365					
Oct-29	1,296	4,147					
Oct-30	1,231	3,939					
Oct-31	1,170	3,744					
Feb-24	1,764	5,645				Assumes 5% growth year on year	
Oct-24	1,852	5,927					
Oct-25	1,945	6,223					
Oct-26	2,042	6,535					

Oct-27	2,144	6,861					
Oct-28	2,251	7,204					
Oct-29	2,364	7,565					
Oct-30	2,482	7,943					
Oct-31	2,606	8,340					

Recommendations

In the light of the above, what is the recommendation to GA on the future of *Reform*?

Keep and celebrate *Reform* for the specific role it serves

The magazine is intimately tied to the history and present of the URC, having started 51 years ago and morphed slowly along the years. It provides a unique way of connecting across and communicating both within and beyond the URC that will be difficult to easily replicate digitally.

There is also a (manageable) reputational risk if you were to just get rid of it. The magazine plays a unique role, and is different from a functional news update that can be easily (and successfully) delivered via the digital route of regular emails.

However, *Reform* needs to be more effective financially – here are some options to consider:

Reduce the number of issues and retaining subscription fee level

Reducing to eight issues a year as soon as is practicable whilst keeping the subscription costs the same. Few readers would notice, and the impact on advertising revenue is likely to be minimal.

It is estimated that this would save around £10,000 p.a.

Consider the staffing costs as part of a wider staffing update

The work on *Reform* should link to the wider communication strategy and ‘in year’ plan. As such, the staffing of *Reform* will need to balance the different elements of graphics, content and editorial oversight alongside the wider work of the Communications team in fulfilment of the URC’s needs.

Plan to move to entirely digital magazine, but over a period of time

News Update clearly works as a monthly email, and the engagement rate within it shows that people are happy to receive updates in this format.

But it serves a different purpose to a magazine; the magazine is more reflective and people don’t engage as well with that content digitally.

Reform could move digitally by 2030, as Jane proposes, but to reach that stage a concerted effort to increase digital subscriptions from now until then, and to create a proactive marketing plan for this (thereby reaching new and younger audiences) needs to be put in play.