

Paper C1

Communications update

Communications Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Lucy Brierley lucywokingurc@yahoo.co.uk Andy Jackson andy.jackson@urc.org.uk
Action required	Note.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To update General Assembly on the work of the Communications Committee and team since the last meeting, and to outline the work over the next year.
Main points	To challenge churches to think about events, their digital outreach.
Previous relevant documents	Papers C1, C2, C3, C4 and C5, General Assembly 2023.
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Moderators, Finance.

Summary of impact

Financial	
External (eg ecumenical)	

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 local, regional and national communications
- supporting the communications of Church House departments and the General Assembly
- resourcing local churches.

The team looks after reputational management, press enquiries and press releases, *Reform*, graphic design, the URC Bookshop, publications, resources, the Community Project Awards, websites, social media and iChurch.

This is the update from the team about its work over the past 12 months, which can be discussed in the parallel session, to which all are welcome.

Please also see the paper on the Future of *Reform*, Business Committee Paper A11.

Communications Strategy

After the General Assembly approved the Communications Strategy at its last meeting, work has been undertaken to shape the research and resource stages.

The research stage is using the Annual Church Returns to build an initial communications profile of each local church, and we have appointed a researcher to contact all URCs to develop this further and to ask what else is needed to help churches communicate and engage more widely.

The second stage is to expand the URC's wide range of resources, and to create a list of new resources and toolkits that churches tell us they need and, more importantly, will use. These toolkits and resources will be informed by our churches, while also being mindful of the reduced amount of volunteer time.

It's worth noting that there are already 40+ resources on the URC website, as well as the iChurch platform.

Alongside this stage, a network of Communications Advocates will be created, with the hope that one volunteer advocate will be recruited in each Synod who can be a link between the Communications Team, churches and Synods to share and remind them about the URC's resources, and to act as a conduit to request and develop new ones.

There is the potential for Communication Advocates to assist in the updating of the URC database, and that the communication profiles are seen not simply as a collection of facts and channels, but key ingredients and resources within the wider ministry of communication and evangelism.

From September, Clare Coombs, the Communications Officer for Mersey Synod, will start to contact all URCs about their communications needs and skills.

Events

The Communications Committee wishes to augment the Communications Strategy to encourage local churches, LEPs and Synods to share their experience of running events, to show how easy and cheap it can be to set up and staff stands at external events such as county shows, Christmas fairs, community events and festivals.

This could include advice from Synods that run major events such as Big Days Out, and knowledge gained from the Communications Team, which exhibits at CRE and other events, such as the Baptist Assembly.

It could also include sharing knowledge from church-based events such as Woking URC's bacon roll commuter giveaway, or West Kirby URC's Staycation.

Commercial events are often viewed as expensive but necessary by local businesses, but are they ever considered by local churches?

Remember that a lot of the work has already been done. The URC publishes a range of resources, such as giveaway booklets and leaflets about the URC and the meaning of Easter and Christmas, with a space for churches to add their details.

The Communications Team can help to create resources for specific events. For example, if local URCs were at a secular Christmas Fair, they might want a leaflet to give away at that event with the location of URCs and LEPs, along with service times.

Some events might need gazebos and roller banners, but these can cost very little and be reused multiple times.

Volunteer time is also a factor, but in many cases, these events are attractive to the church members, volunteers and their families, and so getting a free ticket to the events can lead to increased offers of help.

Spending time and money at shows and events is valuable in telling people about their local URCs or LEPs, offering friendly, one-to-one engagement with the hundreds or thousands of people that you might otherwise not reach, and giving them something to take away, such as the URC's Christmas booklet, and details about the local church.

And it's not something that you do once in the hope that people will drop all of their plans and turn up to all Christmas services. Like brands that invest time and money to get people to buy their products, exhibiting at events must be treated as a three or five year strategy, so that people who return to an event each year get to know that you're also there each year, building trust and credit.

In-person events are making a steady recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic, with many expected to return to pre-pandemic levels this year or next.

Events also:

- enhances the church's visibility
- gets people volunteering with something new, strengthening congregations and outreach teams, especially with start-of-day and end-of-day catch-ups and handovers to other volunteers
- allows volunteers, ministers, CRCWs and worship leaders the chance to meet even more people in their communities
- to reset misconceptions about the Church (with trust levels down to 28-35% according to recent reports)
- encourages different ways of engaging with all types of visitors – all of whom God loves and whom we should welcome if they want to come to Church
- show a positive side of the Church, eg showing videos of our community work such as the videos produced for the Community Project Awards and for Greenbelt.

Case study: Knebworth Christmas Fair

The Knebworth Christmas Fair takes place at the end of November, costs up to £600 for the exhibition space, and attracts more than 16,000 people over the three-day weekend event. That's £200 per day to engage with 5,300 people each day, excluding the cost of resources and volunteer travel.

If that were shared by the 12 URCs within a ten-mile radius of the venue, then the cost would be tiny, and the number of possible volunteers would be in the dozens.

Parallel session discussion

Discussion is invited at the parallel session about whether we should take this forward, and to look at major events around the UK with Synods, with the possibility of helping those synods resource a URC presence.

Staffing

We are delighted that Neil Hunter has joined the staff team on a part-time basis, which means we have been able to further develop many areas of the URC website.

Reform

Increased marketing activity for *Reform* led to an 11% increase in subscriptions from 2023 to 2024. Each issue now includes more content for its readers, and has increased its font size to make the content more accessible.

A reader survey was shared in May which received more than 800 responses. Those answers are being analysed, and will be shared with the Resources Committee.

- **Please see a separate report about *Reform* from the Business Committee, paper A11.**

Bookshop

In 2023, the Bookshop distributed 2,248 orders, as well as supplying shops and Synods, selling more than 15,000 items with a turnover of more than £84,000.

Whereas the majority of orders are placed and paid for online at www.urcshop.co.uk, those who want to order by phone can do so during office hours, on 020 7916 8629. A voicemail service is in operation if no one is available to take the call.

You will be able to find a good selection of URC resources, books and merchandise at the General Assembly bookstall in the sports hall.

Podcast

Steve Tomkins and Ann-Marie Nye have broadcast several episodes of the URC podcast with Isaac Harvey MBE, the Revd Dr John Bradbury, the Revd Margaret Ali, and the Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson, to name a few. More episodes are planned, and you can download the podcast from wherever you get your podcasts, or by visiting www.reform-magazine.co.uk/urc-podcast

Community Project Awards

These are being presented on the Saturday of the General Assembly. We are deeply grateful for Congregational increasing its support to the URC, so that the awards now consist of three winners' awards of £2,000 and three Highly Commended awards of £1,000. You can read more about the winning projects at www.urc.org.uk/awards

We are grateful to all projects that submitted applications, and the following people who generously donated their time to judge this year's awards: the Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson, Martin Cox (CEO), Imran Laher and Helen Doran of Congregational, Andy Jackson, the Revd Lucy Brierley, the Revd Iain McLaren, Steve Priest, Jonathan Allan, the Revd George Watt, Dr Stephen Tomkins and the Revd Sarah Moore.

Thanks also go to Louise Ault for administrating them once again, and to Sara Foyle for her design work.

You can read about the winners in future editions of *Reform* and watch videos about what they do at www.urc.org.uk/awards.

Communications Committee

This met for the final time in March of this year, with the work and oversight being the responsibility of the new Resources Committee from this General Assembly.

At the meeting the convenor, the Revd Lucy Brierley, led prayers to give thanks to all who have served on the communications-related committees, groups and boards since the URC came into being.

This was firstly the work of Publications and Publicity, part of Finance and Administration, renamed Communications and Supplies in 1987, Communications and Editorial in 1995, and finally the Communications Committee from 2008. The committee also offered prayers and for the work of the new Resources Committee.

Press and PR

Most weeks, there a number of safeguarding and property-related enquiries from the media that come into the Press Office, which are dealt with quickly and in conjunction with the relevant synod staff and church leaders. We thank all who work alongside us on these requests.

Media training is available for groups and individuals who speak to the media as part of their role.

News Update is now sent each month to more than 26,000 recipients. If you want to receive News Update, please sign up on the URC website home page, www.urc.org.uk

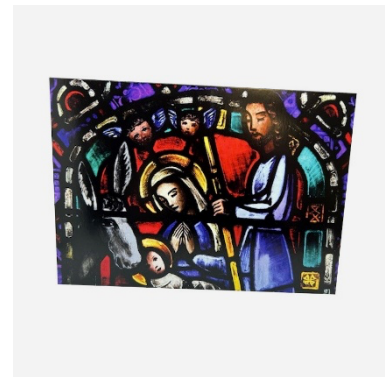
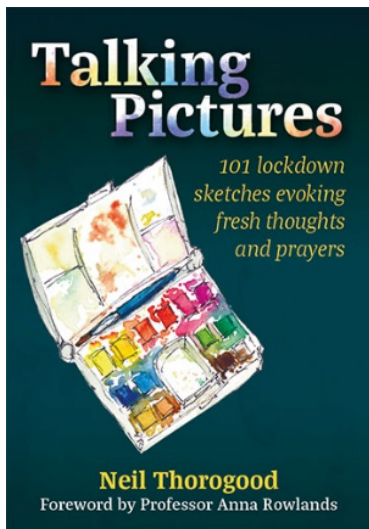
Our mandate is to share the good news, and if you have a good news story to share, please let us know: pressoffice@urc.org.uk.

At the same time, if there is a negative story that you are having to deal with, remember that you are not alone – please call us for advice before making any responses.

We have an out-of-hours media response line to Ann-Marie Nye and Andy Jackson for emergency calls.

Graphic design

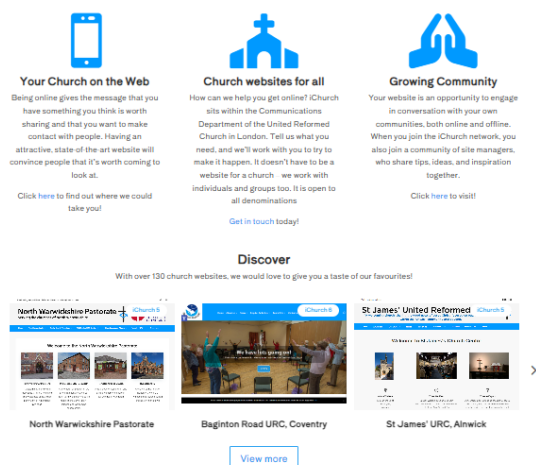
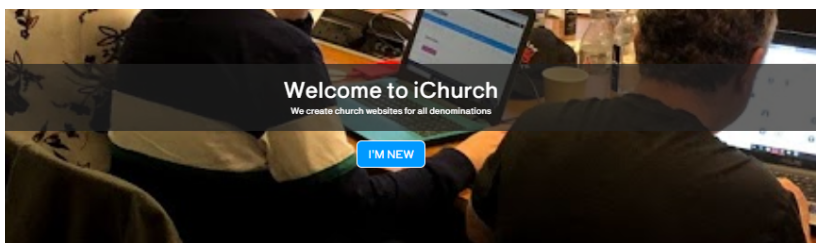
As usual, the graphics team has designed hundreds of resources for local churches, Synods and Church House teams. Three examples are below.



iChurch

iChurch is the platform from the URC that manages websites for churches, synods, LEPs and groups of churches. Now with a new website, www.ichurch.website, iChurch offers an easy to use, very affordable way of churches updating or creating a website.

We thank Dan Morrell who has been leading on iChurch, and still helps out, and to Reuben Watt and Rhys Lloyd for taking on the support for web managers and the creation of new websites. They are aided by Mark Foster at VTS Web Services, who hosts many websites for the URC.



Videos

You can see a wide selection of videos on the URC's YouTube channel, www.youtube.com/URCUK

Prayer Handbook editors

The next editors of the URC Prayer Handbook will be the Revd Dr Susan Durber and the Revd Jonnie Hill. We are indebted to the Revd Susan McCoan and the Revd Stephen Ansa-Addo for the last three editions, the last of which, *Immersive Joy*, will be available from September.