

Paper C1

Better, kinder, safer: improving what we can do digitally

Communications Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Peter Stevenson (Convenor) revdpete@btinternet.com Andy Jackson (Head of Communications) andy.jackson@urc.org.uk
Action required	
Draft resolution(s)	

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To update the General Assembly on the work of the Communications Committee; to agree best practice for all who produce and manage websites and social media channels for the life and work of the URC.
Main points	An update of the work of the Communications Team in 2020 and 2021.
Previous relevant documents	Papers C1 and C2, Mission Council, March 2020; Communications Committee report, General Assembly 2020; Papers C1, C2 and C3, Mission Council, March 2021.
Consultation has taken place with...	Consultation has taken place with the Communications Committee, Publishing Board, General Secretariat, Finance, teams at United Reformed Church House, Synod Moderators, members and friends of the URC on social media.

Summary of impact

Financial	<i>Reform</i> subsidy and staffing costs reduced; bookshop revenues increasing.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Increased engagement inside and outside the URC through the website, social media channels, new and updated printed and digital resources, with families through the sale and distribution of Lent and Advent kits; coronavirus advice and information guides on many subjects; research, development and production of a new URC website.

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 regional / national communications
- Supporting the communications of Church House departments and General Assembly
- Resourcing the local churches.

Coronavirus advice and information guides

When the first lockdown as announced in March 2020, no-one knew just how devastating the impact of coronavirus would be.

Communications had just begun to roll out a programme of new information guides about how to use social media channels when church buildings closed. More help was needed fast, with all aspects of communications as churches quickly adapted to engage with dispersed congregations.

The Revds John Proctor and Steve Faber quickly worked to publish advice about what churches could and couldn't do, and the URC owes Steve a huge amount of thanks for turning hurried, mixed and complex government advice into clear and understandable counsel from the URC.

Steve later went on to write and compile *Ready for the New Normal* and *Emerging Into the New Normal* with others, which were very well received not only in the URC, but by ecumenical and interfaith partners. The Muslim Council of Britain and others recommended the document because it was one of the first comprehensive guides produced by a mainstream faith organisation.



Other advice and information guides followed, along with a range of downloadable items and goods to purchase for the reopening of church buildings. The Communications Team was agile and speedy in the way it designed and delivered all sorts of digital and physical resources for the church, and Peter and I would like to thank them all for their contributions in 2020 and this year.

Community Awards

The 2020 Community Awards were postponed when it became clear that visits to projects were not going to take place, not only because it was unsafe to do so but also because many projects that submitted an entry were closed because the church buildings were.

Projects that were shortlisted in 2020 were allowed to transfer their shortlisting to the 2021 or 2022 awards.

Thanks to the generosity of Congregational Insurance, the sponsor of the awards, funds for the prizes were carried over



to 2021. At the time of writing, it is hoped that awards for 2020 and 2021 will be presented at the General Assembly.

Digital Content Officer

Catherine Kelliher joined the team on the day when the Prime Minister announced the first national lockdown. Catherine has worked in digital content for Scope, Action Against Hunger, Barking and Dagenham and Islington Councils, The Fostering Network and Christian Aid.

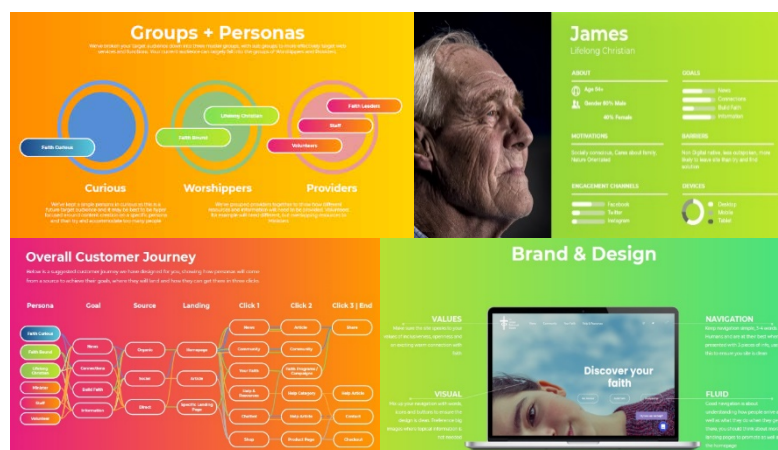
Her remit is to help with the launch of the new URC website, a presentation about which will be made at Mission Council, to produce and improve digital content (eg the dropdown menus on the coronavirus advice page) and to help with social media and other digital projects.

New URC website

In 2020, work began to transform the URC website, www.urc.org.uk.

An audit of content took place revealing that just 72 of the 5,000+ pages on the website accounted for more than 70% of the 616,000 visits in 2020.

Mission Council, staff, other URC groups and an online focus group have been involved with the research and development, as will all staff who create and publish content on URC websites and social media channels. A draft version of the new website should be available for the General Assembly.



Advent and Lent kits

The Head of Communications had a long-held idea about a kit to engage with families. Many churches have families that use the church, but there is a lack of resources that bridge the gap between the Christian purpose of the building and the people and groups that use them.

Thanks to the wonderful work by the Children's and Youth Work and CYDO+ teams, *Advent Hope & Joy* was launched on 9 October, and ten days later close to 2,000 had been sold. We thought we might sell 300!

In total, 2,157 kits were assembled and despatched from Church House, given to families to tell them that their local URC remembers them, cares for them and wants to connect with them.

Over the six weeks from the start of Advent to Epiphany, six aspects of the Christmas story were explored. Each week had an envelope packed with ideas for quick to complex activities.

Each box included a copy of the new *Colours of Christmas* story book, an A3 colouring sheet and Christmas story 'spot the difference' puzzle, weekly activity envelopes, colouring pencils, a gold pen, labels, a cookie cutter, a tea light candle, JPIT action postcards, a wooden star and crown, a Walking the Way foot and cord, a stained glass window to decorate and display, craft ideas, reflective activities and prayer practices. Because these kits sold out so quickly, all of the elements and suppliers were added to the URC website. Families on Faith Adventures@Home online resources for deeper faith-focussed engagement were also added to the website.

Lent

After the success of Advent, and with Lent just around the corner, another collaboration between Children's and Youth, Communications, Education and Learning and Ministries resulted in Walking towards Easter together, a kit containing an A3 poster, a journal book containing daily reflections and stories, stickers and a recipe booklet. In all, 5,000 have been sold, although 255 were given to armed service and higher education chaplains.



Digital Mission Council and General Assembly

After the URC's March Mission Council was cancelled, the Mission Council followed by the General Assembly met via Zoom on 10-11 July. There was some doubt about whether the work of both meetings could be done digitally, but both meetings were successful.

Feedback from those meetings resulted in changes to the November and March meetings of the Mission Council, and to the meeting of the General Assembly. Our thanks to all who contributed in the run up to, and during, the meetings, especially those who acted as Zoom co-hosts and Affinity Events.



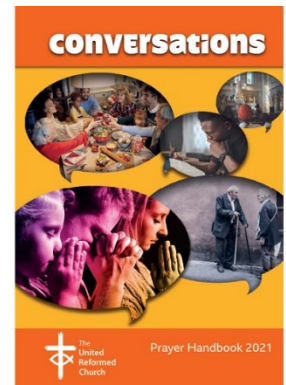
House style

The URC's new House Style was confirmed by the committee and can be found at www.urc.org.uk/house-style. The committee encourages all in the URC to use it.

Prayer Handbook

The *2021 Prayer Handbook, Conversations*, the second prayer handbook to be edited by Karen Campbell and the Revd Ian Fosten, added prayers for everyday and extraordinary situations to the regular prayers that follow the pattern of lectionary-based Bible readings. The feedback has again been exceptionally positive.

The *2022 Prayer Handbook* will reflect on the meaning of jubilee in our biblical texts and has the theme '*Jubilee: Free to live...*' Contributors have been invited to consider the ways in which jubilee is experienced in everyday life through the knowledge of God, and the relationships that are shared with God.



Graphics

In 2020 the team produced, amongst other items:

- Further improvements to the *URC Yearbook*, making it even easier to use
- The 2021 Prayer Handbook, *Conversations*, edited by Karen Campbell and Ian Fosten, and a Lectern (large print) edition of the handbook
- The design of the URC Information Guides
- The coronavirus advice guides
- The *What We Believe* series for the Faith and Order Committee
- A new range of URC certificates
- A Christmas card from the General Secretariat
- RMHS newsletters and handbook
- Infant feeding sign
- A new range of Enquirer's Conference resources
- *Common Ground*, the URC Children's and Youth resource for 2020
- *They've asked me to be* series – written by Gill Nichol and relevant URC bodies, such as the Faith and Order Committee and CRCW Coordinator. These explain a variety of paid and voluntary roles in the URC. These are free to download from www.urc.org.uk/ask. Other suggestions are always welcome
- Child Friendly Church certificates, plaques and leaflets
- Legacy of Slavery resources and web pages
- Walking the Way materials
- The Advent Hope & Joy kit
- Coronavirus resources for churches
- The *URC Yearbook* – a major collaboration with Ministries
- Updates to The Manual
- Digitisation of older *Books of Reports and Assembly Records*
- Safeguarding newsletters and *Good Practice 5* appendices
- Commitment for Life Prayer Partners
- Flexible Framework Toolkit for Churches Together in England – a new resource for churches looking to form LEPs
- Local Preacher pin badges
- Pilots' resource about Fiji
- General Assembly resources
- A redesign of *Old Grey Prayers* by the late Bernard Thorogood
- Zoom backgrounds and advice guides
- A digital palm cross, which became one of the most shared pieces of content from the URC Facebook page and website

- Wooden paperweight
- Community Awards resources and leaflets.



Future work

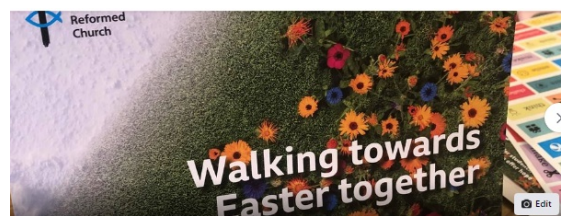
Different versions of the *Worship from the United Reformed Church Parts 1 & 2* are being considered, as are cards to media outlets to help get our name right, prayer request and welcome cards, 50th anniversary materials, 2022 diaries, and marketing materials for *Reform* distributors, as well as the usual support for Mission Council and the General Assembly.

Social media

The growth in Facebook and Instagram, in terms of those who Like or Follow the URC channels, has helped to get our key messages and campaigns to even more people. The reach of Twitter has decreased slightly by 3%, which indicates it is at its peak for the URC, and the type of content shared on the channel will be reviewed in the digital and communications strategies.

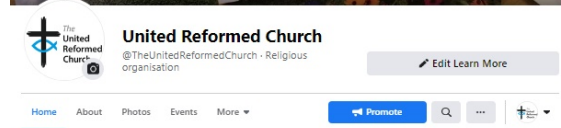
Facebook: www.facebook.com/TheUnitedReformedChurch

Likes (1 January to 31 December): there were 3,040 people who have liked our Facebook page, up from 2,247 last year. Reach, the number of people who saw content from the URC's page or about the URC, was 1,075,548, an increase of 4% on 2020.



Twitter: www.twitter.com/UnitedReformed

There are 4,426 people following the URC on Twitter and our tweets were seen 809,100 times. These Twitter impressions (the number of times a tweet appears in a user's timeline) are slightly down on 2020.



Instagram: www.instagram.com/unitedreformed

This was launched in 2019 and currently has 734 followers, up from 396 in the last year's report. The content is usually the same as that shared on Facebook and Twitter, but there will be greater definition of the content for this channel as the digital and communications strategies are developed.

Communications and media relations

The URC Social Media Guidelines have been revised to encourage online conversations that reflect the values of the URC. These apply to all content posted on social media accounts at all levels of the Church, including all using the name, logo and brand of the URC.

The Digital Charter and Social Media Guidelines are subject to resolution.

The new Digital Charter is a voluntary pledge encouraging people and churches to make to help make all United Reformed Church's social media channels, and the web in general, a positive place for respectful conversations to happen.

Sadly, this doesn't always happen which is why we would like the General Assembly to adopt these guidelines so that should any members, ministers or friends of the URC receive online abuse, action can be taken.

News Update email

At the start of 2020, there were 2,531 subscribers, which increased to more than 6,550 by the end of the year, thanks to NU being classed as a work-based email and ministers and office holders being added. Anyone can unsubscribe, as always, but few people have since being added to the list. NU is sent out every month and has news from around the URC. To subscribe and to find out how to contribute, visit urc.org.uk/nu or email press.office@urc.org.uk.

Reputation management

There were a number of reputation management cases, ranging from a community incident, access to a graveyard, the closing of churches and church halls, and historical sex offences.

All reputation management files continue to be kept up-to-date digitally and retention periods are being investigated by the Church House Management Group and the URC's legal adviser.

Press releases

A number of press releases were issued in 2020, now targeted to media channels – magazines, newspapers, digital, radio and TV stations – rather than sending all releases to all channels regardless of content. This gives what we share to the media a greater impact.

The subjects included URC Youth climate emergency action at Mission Council; our new General Secretary; Church Without Walls accepted as a new URC congregation; Church leaders urging the UK government to help deter the annexation of West Bank; URC leaders saying we must be 'anti-racist' following the killing of George Floyd; UK pension funds investing billions in nuclear weapons; our Moderators saying Dominic Cummings should 'consider his position'; the URC Moderators' shock and sadness at reactions to BBC Friday prayers broadcasts on local radio, to name a few.



Songs of Praise

The Revd John Bradbury was interviewed for *Songs of Praise* in August for the episode about the Pilgrim Fathers, in which Steve Tomkins also appeared. Our thanks for Palmers Green URC and the Revds Melanie Smith and Mark Meatcher for letting us use the church for the filming.



Soon after that episode aired, *Songs of Praise* visited the Victorian village of Saltaire near Bradford, the vision of Christian industrialist Sir Titus Salt. The programme looked at how he was motivated by his faith to build what is now Saltaire United Reformed Church, the Grade-I listed church that was damaged by storm Dennis in 2020. The programme also interviewed the Christian architect in charge of the restoration, and a member of the congregation who kneels in prayer outside the church each week.

Publishing Board

The Publishing Board, a sub-committee of the Communications Committee, is chaired by the Revd Heather Whyte.

The board's remit is to assess publishing proposals from URC writers and unsolicited manuscripts and synopses and to decide if they are publishable in line with the URC's publications policy (Paper C1, Mission Council 2016).

The Board has been involved with the following:

- *Constance: Pioneer, Pastor, Preacher* – a collection of essays about Constance Coltman, the first women to be ordained into Trinitarian Christian ministry, edited by the Revd Janet Wootton. This is now available from www.urcshop.co.uk, generously supported by the Council for World Mission
- Publications to mark the 50th anniversary of the United Reformed Church. The Revds David Cornick and Robert Pope are writing one book, Steve Tomkins, Editor of *Reform*, is writing another, and the Revd Anne Sardeson is looking at a book about the music and hymnody of the URC. There is also a joint publication with the Congregational Federation, which also celebrates its anniversary in 2022, a series of positive reflections that reflect back but also looks forward, and contributions from URC members and ministers are welcome. The Revd Peter Brain is co-editing the book.
- *A Great Cloud of Witnesses Part 3, Death and Beyond* by the Revd Barbara Bennett, which was published in January
- *Hook* – A five-week course of spiritual journeying based on the film 'Hook', reflections by the Revd Heather Whyte.

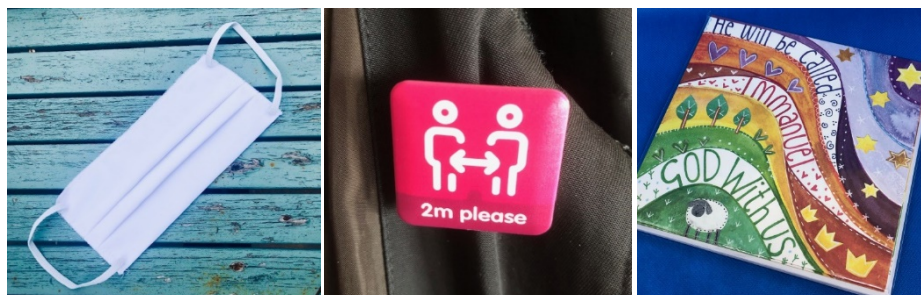


Bookshop

The URC Bookshop had another good year, with figures close to the £70,000 turnover mark.

The final figures will be confirmed once the work by the auditors on the 2020 accounts has finished.

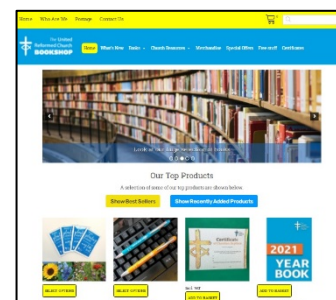
In 2020, coronavirus products were introduced, including Keep 2m apart badges, Clean hands badges, floor tape, floor signs, vinyl and roller banners, reusable stickers and other resources for churches. These complemented the wide range of free downloadable resources for churches on the URC website.



Christmas cards and other festive items were popular last year with the sending of cards boosted by the pandemic. Steve Tomkins' book *The Journey to the Mayflower* was also a good seller for the bookshop, as were goods designed by Caroline Flint of Heartistic – art with a heart. Caroline is the daughter of Linda Mead, the URC's former Commitment for Life programme officer.

New URC Bookshop website

Because most spring and autumn Synod meetings were cancelled or changed to digital meetings, the bookshop website, www.urcshop.co.uk took many more orders for diaries, prayer handbooks and other resources usually sold at Synods. The age of the website (six years) showed and so a new bookshop website was launched in April.



Christian Resources Exhibition

As part of an ongoing arrangement with the organisers of the Christian Resources Exhibition, the URC offers advertising in *Reform* in exchange for a presence at the national Christian Resources Exhibition (CRE).

The spring show took place in March at the Arthur Rank Centre at Stoneleigh, just before the first lockdown and the Esher show was cancelled.

The stand was extremely popular, and many staff and volunteers helped throughout the show. Our thanks to them.

The national CRE will take place on 12 to 14 October 2021, at Sandown Park in Esher, Surrey, and the CRE South West will now take place from 23 to 24 February 2022 at Westpoint, Exeter.



Reform

Reform has kept going smoothly throughout the continued pandemic, despite several challenges. Because many copies of *Reform* are usually distributed through churches, the team and subscription management company had to reorganise the delivery system and get the magazines directly to subscribers.

This had an impact on the magazine's finances during a time when it was trying to reduce costs.

Some late cancellations of interviews and articles were also caused by coronavirus, but the gaps were plugged. Advertising also fell soon after lockdown started, but picked up again from September. Income has reduced as a result, but it is hoped an increase in revenue this year will make up for that unexpected loss.



Free access to the digital edition of the magazine was given soon after the first lockdown started, and more than 1,850 visits were made. Digital subscriptions reached their highest ever point in 2020 accounting for 10% of subscribers.

The result is that *Reform* has been one of the ways that the Communications Team has helped different parts of the URC stay in touch and reflect on the situation we find ourselves in, and we have been glad to hear how this is appreciated. Articles discussing the challenges and opportunities of online church seem to have particularly engaged readers.

In October the subscriptions will be brought back in house, which will halve the costs of database management and subscriptions renewals compared to using a third-party company.

The magazine has also stopped using plastic wrapping. Subscriptions have gone down by a few percentage points as they have in previous years.

iChurch

iChurch is the low-cost website platform for churches to set up and maintain websites quickly and easily. Dan Morrell and Reuben Watt have been helping iChurch web managers with technical queries, as well as offering training, support via email and on Facebook.

The billing remains at £9.99 per month, cheaper than many other church website providers, and the basic website set-up cost is £150. Visit www.interactivechurch.org.uk for details.

