

Paper C1

Communications and editorial committee
Update on *Reform* subscriptions
and marketing

United Church 2016
Church 2016
Reformed Church 2016
Church 2016



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Communications and editorial committee

Update on *Reform* subscriptions and marketing

Basic Information

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Action required	For information
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	Interim report on progress made in the three-year campaign to increase sales of <i>Reform</i> and improve its finances.
Main points	Marketing work undertaken and planned by the communications department; sales figures
Previous relevant documents	Paper C3 at the November 2014 Mission Council
Consultation has taken place with...	The communications and editorial committee and the finance department

Summary of Impact

Financial	The denomination's investment in <i>Reform</i> , of up to £90,000 a year, as agreed by Mission Council in November 2014, continues until November 2017; it is already in the budget
External (e.g. ecumenical)	None.

Update on *Reform* subscriptions and marketing

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Mission Council discussed *Reform* in November 2014. Noting the communications and editorial committee's focus on increasing subscriptions and developing *Reform*'s role in the Church, Mission Council agreed 'to support *Reform* by continuing with the current annual subsidy – not to exceed £90,000 in any one budget year – for the next three budget years'. It asked the communications and editorial committee 'to present up-to-date subscription numbers to Mission Council in March 2016'.
- 1.2 This paper is an interim report on the work being carried out to meet those objectives. Paper C2, containing up-to-date sales figures for *Reform*, will be tabled at Mission Council, because sales figures provided during *Reform*'s December/January renewal season are unreliable.

2. Marketing *Reform*

When the communications and editorial committee reported to Mission Council in November 2014, the marketing of *Reform* had recently become a much larger part of the work of the communications department than it had been before. It has continued to be a high priority, drawing on the resources of the whole department, and with regular marketing meetings in which the Revd Lucy Berry acted as our marketing consultant. Since November 2014 the following new initiatives have been undertaken to promote *Reform*:

2.1 Reviving the distributor system

- 2.1.1 In 2008, *Reform* moved from a system where local church distributors were the main way of circulating the magazine, to a system which encouraged individual subscriptions (though 347 distributors remain, as of January 2016). Many churches have told us, however, that fewer members are buying the magazine there now than when there was a distributor promoting it; and so the department is focussing its efforts on reviving and actively promoting the distributor system.
- 2.1.2 A new distributor pack, including a handbook, promotional materials and special offers, was created in 2015, and sent to existing distributors in January 2016, to encourage them in their work and assist them in promoting *Reform* to new subscribers. (Copies of the pack will be available from the media desk at Mission Council, for any members of Mission Council who are interested in this initiative and might like to take the pack back to their home church or other churches.)
- 1.3 Churches without *Reform* distributors were contacted in February 2016, encouraged to set up new distribution groups and offered help in doing so.

2.2 Restricting the number of free copies

During discussion at Mission Council 2014, concern was expressed about the number of free copies of *Reform* that were in circulation, reducing people's incentive to pay for a subscription. Since then, the number of free subscriptions has been

reduced from 1,271 to 433. (Before 2014, there had been more than 3,000 free copies in circulation.) The remaining 433 free subscriptions go largely to synod training officers.

2.3 Digital edition

- 2.3.1 The digital edition of *Reform*, which can be read on tablets, smartphones and computers, was launched in April 2015. The communications department has actively promoted it through the URC website, social media channels, *News Update (NU)* and the *Reform* website. Promotional leaflets were distributed at Mission Council, General Assembly, the Churches Together in England Forum event and the URC publications office.
- 2.3.2 Special offers have been introduced for students, RE teachers and readers of *NU*. The offers have been promoted through United Reformed Youth, the Student Christian Movement, the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education and *NU*. In 2015, 22 of these special offers were taken up, increasing subscriptions to digital *Reform* by 16%.
- 2.3.3 Annual subscriptions cost £18 for digital only and £31 for print plus digital, compared to £25 for a print-only subscription. Digital is also available on a three-month subscription for £6. The digital edition contains bonus media including video and image galleries, and gives subscribers access to back issues dating back to February 2014. (For current subscription figures, see paper C2, to be tabled at Mission Council.)
- 2.3.4 Free access to digital *Reform* will be available during Mission Council to all delegates.

2.4 Small group study materials

To make *Reform* more useful as a church resource, the team now publishes small group discussion questions online, to accompany each of the regular Bible studies in the magazine. These have been promoted in *Reform*, in *NU*, on social media and through the guide for distributors handbook. Although the *Reform* website is not able to measure exactly how many times these discussion questions have been downloaded, the download page was visited 1,121 times in the second half of 2015.

2.5 Advertising

In order to promote *Reform* to new readers within a tight marketing budget, free advertisements were arranged, as favours from friends or as contra deals (i.e. a free advertisement in our publication in exchange for a free advertisement in theirs). *In GEAR* carried advertising inserts for *Reform* in February 2015, accompanied by an article by the editor of *Reform*. The current issue of *Movement*, the magazine of the Student Christian Movement, has a prominent full page advertisement for *Reform*. The Free To Believe website also carries an advertisement for *Reform*.

2.6 Mail shot

In January 2015, letters were sent to 300 former *Reform* subscribers whose subscriptions lapsed between 2008 and 2012, encouraging them to take a new look at the magazine and resubscribe. Eleven responded directly and resubscribed.

2.7 Visiting churches

The editor of *Reform*, Stephen Tomkins, has been visiting local churches and synods to help build relationships, either by preaching and leading services or by speaking about *Reform* and its vision to resource churches for mission. He visited five churches and one synod event in 2015, and so far has six church visits and one synod event booked for 2016. These visits have raised awareness of *Reform* and the

contribution it can make to church life, and will be of use in building up the distributor network.

3. Subscriptions management

- 3.1 *Reform* moved to a new subscriptions management company in April 2015. This decision was made for two reasons: the previous company had been providing unsatisfactory service to subscribers, and they had given notice of a sharp rise in their rates. After a detailed analysis of the options, *Reform* moved its account to Esco, having concluded that they would provide exceptionally high quality service to subscribers, at competitive rates, and would offer invaluable help in marketing *Reform*. This hope has been amply justified in the past year's experience.
- 3.2 Moving a magazine subscriptions account is an expensive business. Consequently, as the table below shows, *Reform*'s total subscriptions management costs for 2015, including the costs of moving the account, were £18,834, exceeding the budget of £10,000.
- 3.3 The table also shows that from 2016 *Reform*'s subscriptions management costs are projected to show a marked decrease. (The projection is based on 2015 costs). These costs are still projected to be £2,000 over budget however, so savings need to be made in other areas of *Reform*'s budget to compensate. One opportunity for savings is that Esco's services for *Reform* cover work that used to be done by *Reform*'s distribution company, costing more than £1,000, so we hope to see an equivalent reduction in distribution costs.

Annual subscription management costs (2015-2016):

	Previous company	Esco
2015	£14,200 (projected)	£18,834 (actual)
2016	£14,200 (projected)	£12,000 (projected)

4. Editorial board

- 4.1 *Reform*'s editorial board stopped meeting in 2010, but was revived in 2015 and now meets twice a year with the staff of *Reform* and the Head of Communications. It has five other members, representing a wide range of skills, experience and theological perspectives from across the denomination. Its role is to give feedback on the content of the magazine, including what is proving beneficial to churches, and to suggest new content.
- 4.2 One result of the board's feedback has been to make editorial staff more aware of the need for *Reform* to be of more practical use in local churches. This has led to articles such as 'How to be a dementia-friendly church' and 'A site for sore eyes' (offering tips for church websites). Practical features planned for 2016 include how to set up a foodbank and how to be autism-friendly.
- 4.3 A second result has been an awareness of the need for some more easy-going content. This led to the '20 questions' feature which was launched in February 2016.

5. Sales of *Reform*

- 5.1 The number of subscribers to *Reform* averaged 3,973 throughout 2015, compared to 4,091 throughout 2014, a decrease of 118. We are disappointed not yet to be able to announce growth.
- 5.2 However, these figures represent a distinct change in a history of long, steep decline in the sales of *Reform*. Between 2008 and 2013, the number of subscribers fell from 8,112 to 4,585, a decrease of 705 a year. Between 2013 and 2014, it fell by 494. The considerably smaller decrease in 2014 suggests that we may be seeing the long decline in sales of *Reform* bottoming out, and we hope to see that turn into growth. The committee believes that this halt in the decline of sales is a result of both the improvement in the quality of the magazine and the intensive marketing work done by the communications department, so as this work continues throughout 2016 we hope to see an increase in subscribers.
- 5.3 Up-to-date sales figures for *Reform* will be included in paper C2, to be tabled at Mission Council.