

Paper C2

Reform magazine

Communications Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Dr Peter Stevenson (Convenor) revdpete@btinternet.com Mr Andy Jackson (Head of Comms) andy.jackson@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Mission Council recognises the contribution of <i>Reform</i> 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. 2) Mission Council acknowledges with thanks the work of the <i>Reform</i> 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. 3) Mission Council resolves to support <i>Reform</i> over the five-year period to December 2025 by continuing with a reduced annual subsidy, not to exceed £62,000 in 2021 and £50,000 thereafter, and asks the Communications Committee to make regular reports to Mission Council.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	An update on Reform in 2019, and a report on progress made since the last formal report to Mission Council to increase sales of the magazine, to improve its finances, with a recommendation for continued support and investment.
Main points	The value of <i>Reform</i> ; marketing work undertaken; increased URC content; increased engagement with distributors; introduction of marketing tools for local churches.
Previous relevant documents	Paper C1, Mission Council, November 2017.
Consultation has taken place with...	Communications Committee, General Secretariat, Finance Department.

Summary of impact

Financial	Reform continues to need financial investment from URC central funds. This amount has been reduced, due to savings made by the <i>Reform</i> team and the wider Communications Team, to a £50,000 cap (the previous amount was £90,000). This would end on 31 December 2025, an extension of the existing agreement but at a reduced level.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	<i>Reform</i> is well read outside the denomination. Passing this resolution (and therefore supporting the continued development of <i>Reform</i>) will enable continued promotion of the magazine, especially to ecumenical partners and members working in, and attending, LEPs.

1. Background

Mission Council last discussed the future for *Reform* in November 2017. There was consensus that the magazine continues to make a valuable contribution to the life of the United Reformed Church, and it was agreed to extend the denomination's existing investment in *Reform* – not to exceed £90,000 in any one budget year – a period that finishes at the end of 2020.

2. The value of *Reform*

- 2.1 The feedback that the team continues to receive online, by email, in verbal comments and by letter says that *Reform* inspires and challenges, provokes debate, keeps readers informed about the life and work of the Church, and continues to add something to our denominational identity.
- 2.2 The editor of *Reform* regularly preaches in churches, contributing to local church life and building relationships with *Reform*.
- 2.3 *Reform* and *Digest* is one of the channels through which 'Walking the Way' and Stepwise is promoted in churches.
- 2.4 The digital edition of *Reform*, launched in April 2015, offers alternative and cheaper ways to read the magazine. The app is also more accessible for people with visual impairments, and it comes with a searchable online archive.
- 2.5 The communications committee believes that *Reform* contributes to the mission, discipleship and identity of the URC is well worth the annual investment that the denomination makes. But the *Reform* team, and the committee, have been mindful of the investment and has been working hard to reduce costs:
 - In 2019 the mailing house was changed which saved the magazine around £12,000 per year
 - The printing of the magazine is under review, as there is a possible £5,000 saving achieved by combining the printing and mailing service
 - The subscriptions service is currently under review, especially since a recent price rise. The team will look at other ways to manage subscriptions, renewals and the marketing of the magazine.

- 2.6 *Reform* generates money but not at the level of a commercial enterprise. It is a tool for the mission and discipleship of the URC. *Reform* is also used to promote URC publications and merchandise, which improve awareness of the URC. Without *Reform*, sales opportunities will be lost.
- 2.7 We should not think of *Reform* simply in terms of its cost to the denomination, but as a tool which we would invest in like any other. If someone interested in the URC or becoming a member was given a copy, they would read a whole range of interesting features about the URC and Christianity in general.
- 2.8 The magazine should be thought about in terms of interesting those interested in becoming members and sustaining those who are Ministers, Elders, other leaders, CRCWs, volunteers and members.
- 2.9 Many charities spend large amounts of money to recruit and retain regular donors. The URC is also doing that but instead of regular giving, it is making disciples of Christ, and *Reform* is a regular tool to help with persuasion, conversion and maintenance of that discipleship.

3. Editorial board

The editorial board meets annually with members from across the URC giving feedback on the content, ideas for future content (such as the Here & Now column for younger writers), how *Reform* is received in local churches and how well it is serving their needs.

4. Content

As well as the monthly Editorial from Stephen Tomkins, the magazine also includes:

- News items from the UK and the world which have a religious slant or impact on the church's work (e.g. Church and Society, Global and Intercultural Ministry)
- Readers' letters
- A Letter From ... location-based features covering a diverse range of subjects. In the past year it has included articles from the area of the Amazon where large fires are taking place to clear land; the Faith Bridge, the focal point in London for religious climate emergency activists; Budapest, Uganda, New Zealand and Angola.
- Art in Focus, fresh religious perspectives on well-known and little-known works of art
- Interviews with a wide range of people, including some controversial figures. In the past year this has included Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General of Amnesty International; Jack Monroe, chef and activist; Nadia Bolz-Weber, writer, speaker and church leader; Benjamin Kwashi, Archbishop of Jos, in central Nigeria; Tim Farron MP; Ben Lindsay and Martin Mosebach
- Chapter and verse, new Bible studies that are also available from Reform's website for churches and groups to use
- I am ... articles based on roles, lifestyles or other usual and unusual perspectives. These have included articles from a farmer, someone on sick leave, an addict, survivor of economic abuse and a haemophiliac
- Commitment-Phobe, charting the journey of a former atheist on her church-based Christian journey
- Here & Now, a new column for younger writers in the Church

- A Good Question, where up to four people offer their reflections on a major question. Questions have included 'What do you think of the virgin birth?', 'Are you afraid of dying?', 'What is the Gospel?' and 'Is democracy broken?'.
- Sheila Maxey's column on her continuing pilgrimage. Sheila also edits the book reviews.
- Local church initiatives
- Film and book reviews
- The Reform Crossword, set by the Revd Colin Richards
- Do Stay for Tea and Coffee, a humorous column from Christian comedian and co-writer of *Miranda*, Paul Kerensa.
- Digest includes news from the URC and notices about its Ministers.

5. Community awards

Reform is again leading the Community Project Awards, in partnership with Congregational Insurance, which the magazine founded more than 20 years ago, which offers three local URC projects up to £2,000 each for innovative projects which have positive effects on local communities. These awards are presented at the General Assembly.

6. Reader survey

- 6.1 In 2019, the *Reform* team conducted a reader survey. The respondents described themselves as subscribers, past subscribers and those who read the magazine but don't necessarily subscribe. They were made up of URC members, adherents and users of church premises.
- 6.2 70% said *Reform* was either Excellent, Very Good or Good. As regular readers will know, the amount of URC-based content has been increased or made more obvious by the editorial team in the past year. A large majority of respondents agreed that *Reform* improves the way they see the URC.
- 6.3 The feedback received about the magazine has been, and will continue to be, responded to, by the editorial team along with the input by the editorial board.
- 6.4 One recent introduction is the Here & Now column, for younger writers in the Church. This is being greatly assisted by the Children's and Youth Work team, for which we are indebted.
- 6.5 Digest, the URC news supplement, which is included with every issue, and includes reporting from Mission Council, is read by nearly all of the subscribers.

7. The financial position

- 7.1 *Reform* continues to stay within the budget extended by Mission Council in 2017, and has not exceeded the £90,000 cap.
- 7.2 **Annual net cost of Reform 2015-2020**
2015 - £88,571
2016 - £88,172
2017 - £75,002

2018 - £75,294
2019 - £87,341
2020 up to £74,000 (budgeted)
2021 up to £62,000 (proposed)
2022 up to £50,000 (proposed)

- 7.3 The 2020 budgeted figure shows a reduction of £16,000. The subsidy has always been granted on the basis that it may not be used and the team is constantly aware of the financial support the Church gives it and is extremely grateful for that support.
- 7.4 The challenge has always been to keep costs as low as possible while not sacrificing the quality of the magazine. As stated above, following reviews about various aspects of its operation, savings have already been made and more will follow later this year.
- 7.5 The outcome of all this is that the Communications Committee is confident *Reform* can continue to help the mission and discipleship of the URC, with a reduction in the level of investment that Mission Council has agreed in the past.

8. Subscriptions

- 8.1 The price of an annual subscription to *Reform* was raised in December has been held at £29.50 after the results of the reader survey. The following charts the level of subscriptions:

8.2 Subscriptions to Reform (paper and digital)

March 2015	3,661
September 2015	4,108
March 2016	3,786
September 2016	3,765
March 2017	3,656
September 2017	3,669
March 2018	3,486
September 2018	3,489
March 2019	3,292
September 2019	3,541

8.3 Subscriptions and church membership

The saturation of the magazine in the membership remains constant. If you take the membership figures from the yearbook and divide it by the subscriptions in the September of the last three years, you get the following figures, which do not include the total number of readers as there is no way to monitor accurately how many people read *Reform* in households, churches or other groups.

2017 – 7.4%

2018 – 7.6%

2019 – 7.9%

9. Marketing *Reform*

The communications staff have introduced the following new marketing initiatives:

- A free magazine holder for Reform distributors

- A £1 for three issues direct debit offer
- Letter campaign to lapsed subscribers
- Regular updates about the latest issue on social media
- A presence as part of the URC stand at the Christian Resources Exhibition
- Increased incentives and communications to church distributors, a loyal band of volunteers who play a crucial role in the life of the magazine. We thank them regularly when we communicate with them and we urge Mission Council, Synods and churches to do the same
- A presence at the Greenbelt festival as part of the URC's associate partnership, with a special offer for those at Greenbelt.

10. Supporting *Reform*

- 10.1 Read the magazine, especially if you've not read a copy for a while, and letting *Reform* know what you think of it. All feedback is always welcome.
- 10.2 Spread the message to your synods and churches - it is a resource for preachers, worship leaders, Bible study leaders, house group leaders and more. It challenges, inspires, and helps to guide to Christian life. Please encourage local churches and people to subscribe.
- 10.3 As has been said to Mission Council before, 'Don't lose *Reform*.' We are delighted that people value *Reform* enough to share it, but we hope it is shared with a plea for those receiving second or third hand copies, or photocopies of an article, to consider subscribing. Another 1,700 subscribers and *Reform* would not need a subsidy from the Church.

11. Conclusion

- 11.1 *Reform* continues to be valuable to the URC and worth the investment that the denomination makes in it. Because of savings made, *Reform* continues to reduce the cost to the church and this will continue.
- 11.2 The Communications Committee therefore asks Mission Council to extend the provision of funding to *Reform* for the period from 2021 to 2025.