



Communications and Editorial Committee

The United Reformed Church needs REFORM. REFORM needs the United Reformed Church

We believe REFORM is essential to the life, work and outreach of the URC. This paper describes the challenges facing the magazine and the opportunities it has to reach a wider readership within the church and beyond.

It outlines what we are already doing to increase subscribers and cut costs. The URC's subsidy of REFORM is of crucial importance to the magazine's future and we believe it should continue.

REFORM and the Future

The paper is set out as follows:

1. Introduction
2. REFORM's current position and plans - including strategies to reduce the subsidy it receives from the URC
3. Why REFORM needs subsidising - why the Committee is asking Mission Council to agree to the continuation of a substantial URC subsidy
4. New technology
5. Summary

Appendix 1 Financial scenarios/forecasts

Appendix 2 URC feedback

Appendix 3 Wider world feedback

1. Introduction

In the past three years, REFORM has changed from being a URC in-house magazine to becoming a much-respected Christian magazine, rooted in the Reformed and URC traditions. It focuses on thought-provoking commentary and debate around theological, ethical and spiritual questions, as well as reporting on developments about and of interest to the denomination. It reaches out and searches for a wider audience from whom we believe we can attract more subscribers, as well as strengthening the profile and influence of the URC. REFORM strives to embody the values and character of the URC seen in the Vision20/20 Mission statements. Among the many messages of thanks and appreciation received in the office each week, are regular ones saying: "REFORM makes me feel proud to belong to the URC".

REFORM recognises that the URC was, is and will continue to be the prime market for the magazine. It has listened to recent criticisms from some parts of the Church that, in its bid to gain broader appeal and grapple with substantial issues, coverage of denominational news had been reduced. In response, it has launched Digest, a four-page section of the magazine, which reports exclusively on local and national stories from the URC. The response to this has been overwhelmingly positive and encouraging.

The changes to REFORM since its re-launch in July 2008 have attracted new subscribers each month, perhaps for the first time in the magazine's history. However, there has been a serious falling away of subscribers within local URCs.

One of our key plans for the future is winning back and gaining new subscribers who like to read more denominational news. The other is raising our profile within United Reformed churches with no distributor or subscribers at all – more than half the total number of congregations. We have also embarked on a series of cost-cutting measures to bring down our URC subsidy.

2. REFORM's current position and plans

Mission Statement

REFORM magazine embodies and promotes the identity of the United Reformed Church through thought-provoking commentary and debate on theological, ethical, spiritual and interfaith questions. It communicates the work of the Church and the decisions of its councils through the Digest section. REFORM's feature articles offer commentary and analysis on the issues thrown up by the Church's work and decisions. True to the United Reformed Church's ecumenical commitment, the magazine includes writing from within and beyond the denomination, encompassing a wide range of theological viewpoints.

The objectives of REFORM for the next three years are:

- to be widely known, respected and bought by United Reformed Church congregations, including those URCs that have not subscribed before
- to attract back lapsed United Reformed Church subscribers
- to gain and maintain an increase of 5% in subscriptions year-on-year
- to reduce the subsidy from the United Reformed Church (appendix 1)
- to continue making REFORM attractive to non-URC churches and those outside the Church who are interested in spiritual matters
- to address the younger market by developing an electronic version of Reform, available through the website.

SWOT analysis

These are the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for REFORM:

Strengths:

- Recognised quality of product
- Regular positive feedback
(See Appendices 2 and 3)
- Average 30 new subs every month
- Unique selling points as a Reformed/ debating voice and the only United Reformed Church magazine
- Tool to promote United Reformed Church

Weaknesses:

- Core readership is elderly and dwindling year-on-year
- Readership is split: those who preferred "United Reformed Church news" v. "new mag" supporters
- Core URC subscriptions have dropped
- Inactive, elderly distributors
- Relatively unknown product – little to

identity and pride

- Increased interest from wider world outside United Reformed Church (see Appendix 3)

no marketing pre-2009

- Half United Reformed churches don't take REFORM at all
- High level of subsidy from URC

Opportunities:

- Chance to support United Reformed Church ad campaign
- Marketing campaign has got ball rolling in terms of growing brand awareness, which can be built on
- Website creates more exposure and new low-cost medium for marketing
- New monthly Digest of URC news to attract and win back URC readers
- Build on offers attached to complimentary copies
- New approaches to win subscriptions from non-REFORM churches

Threats:

- Adverse economic environment
- Dilemma re split readership unresolved
- Resources for marketing are limited
- Lack of clarity re. strategic United Reformed Church support.
- Finding a way in to non-subscribing churches
- Falling subs threaten print run, which will threaten advertising revenue
- Production costs increase

Cost Cutting

As well as working to expand its revenues through subscriptions and advertising, REFORM is cost-cutting to reduce its subsidy from the URC. Immediate cuts include:

- frequency reduced from 11 to 10 editions per year with effect from 2011;
- spend on images and contributors held at £400 per issue and £600 per issue respectively;
- new quotes requested for cheaper print prices and cheaper, lighter paper;
- provision for marketing expenditure of £15,000 in 2011 - 2014 from an actual spend in 2010 of £18,600.

We fully recognise the need to cut costs still further and will be making every effort to reduce the subsidy from our budget figures of £93,300 to £41,600 by 2014 (see Key Indicators). We would expect to undertake an annual financial review with the Finance Committee to set the subsidy for the coming year.

Marketing plans for 2011 and beyond

REFORM begins 2011 in difficult circumstances. The number of subscriptions bought at the end of 2010 is less than budgeted for. In order to help counter this shortfall, the magazine has dropped its frequency from 11 to 10 copies per year and raised its cover price from £1.80 per copy to £2. We now find ourselves at a point where continued investment and confidence about the future are needed. If subscriptions reduce further our print run costs will become a concern and advertising revenue will be threatened.

A number of marketing strategies have been put in place:

- DIGEST, the new monthly URC news section of REFORM, has been launched and is being promoted
- Contacting lapsed readers through letters announcing DIGEST, and offering new trial copies of magazine
- Approaching churches with no distributor to offer display stand with display copy
- Ensuring REFORM is displayed and, where possible, promoted at Synod meetings
- Seeking REFORM advocates in Synods to help ongoing promotion of REFORM
- Increasing regular communication with distributors; looking at distributor role and exploring whether in some cases REFORM promoters or advocates could supplement their work
- Expanding use of web and new media to generate much wider awareness of the magazine – through developing website and web links, Twitter, Facebook presence for a younger readership
- Approaching ministers who do not subscribe, encouraging them to do so
- Targeting key United Reformed Church and other Christian events with trial copies of REFORM, along with promotional subscription offers
- Including promotional subscription offers with regular trial copies at conference centres, colleges
- Building on awareness-raising letters already sent to new markets (Anglicans, libraries by sending sample copies

After 2011

- Reconsider pricing policy for Reform in Years 2 and 3 – up to 10% increase each year or every other year if necessary
- Continue/review approaches outlined above, depending on their success.

3. Why REFORM needs subsidising

There are two main reasons why we believe REFORM continues to justify substantial investment from the URC, even while we work to reduce the subsidy needed:

- 1: We believe the URC needs REFORM. REFORM occupies, and can increasingly occupy, a very important position in the life of the URC (see Section 2)
- 2: We have clear plans for marketing and budgeting in place and need time to make them work.

i. Investing in REFORM is an investment in the life and voice of the URC

REFORM makes a regular contribution to religious and social debate in Britain, helping to maximise the URC presence in those debates.

REFORM embodies Vision 20/20, as well as the URC's vision of ecumenism. It offers URC members a valuable medium within their tradition through which to wrestle with the meaning of faith in the contemporary world.

REFORM's challenge – to grow within a shrinking market is part of the challenge facing the URC. The URC itself is not contemplating winding down its operation even though membership is reducing each year. Instead we are reaching out to show that the URC has a worthwhile contribution to make and new conversations to have. By keeping REFORM well resourced, we are saying we are proving that we, the URC, are alive and can be taken seriously as a denomination.

ii. Supporting the URC advertising campaign

With the denomination investing in a major national advertising campaign, which we hope will bring new people into contact with the URC and wanting to learn more about us, it is essential to be able to offer REFORM as a shop window. The messages of the ad campaign about inclusiveness, tolerance, freedom of belief and social involvement are embodied by much of what REFORM is about. People who encounter the URC for the first time because of the ad campaign will want to know who we are and what we stand for. REFORM conveys that to them.

iii. Potential of Digest

We are encouraged by early feedback for the new DIGEST section of REFORM. During a recent data-checking exercise, at least 50 distributors expressed enthusiasm about the newsletter and said they expected it to assist their efforts to attract new subscribers or bring back some who missed hearing about local church initiatives. DIGEST also gives us a new reason to market to around 800 “non REFORM” churches, where no distributors are in place and awareness of the magazine is assumed to be very low. We have begun a new initiative: asking these churches to agree to display a free copy of REFORM each month; most have agreed to do so.

iv. Something to be proud of

Our feedback suggests REFORM has earned a great deal of respect from those in other denominations and Christian organisations (see Appendix 3). This makes REFORM an asset to the denomination, as many of our readers, including non-URC members, have told us (see Appendix 2). All of this increases self confidence and bolsters the image of the church.

vi. Working harder for the URC

The challenge is to make REFORM work harder for the URC by becoming known in more URC churches. A major new initiative is underway to ensure this happens. It is not something we have yet properly tested – we need time to make it happen.

Some people have even suggested that REFORM should be sent out free to all URC members. This may not be affordable or practicable for us, but it is important to remember that many organisations do find it worthwhile to invest in their publications to the extent of distributing them for free, because of the dividends that are reaped for the organisation's image, status and message. It can be argued that investment should be made to ensure REFORM does reach more people in the church.

4. New Technology

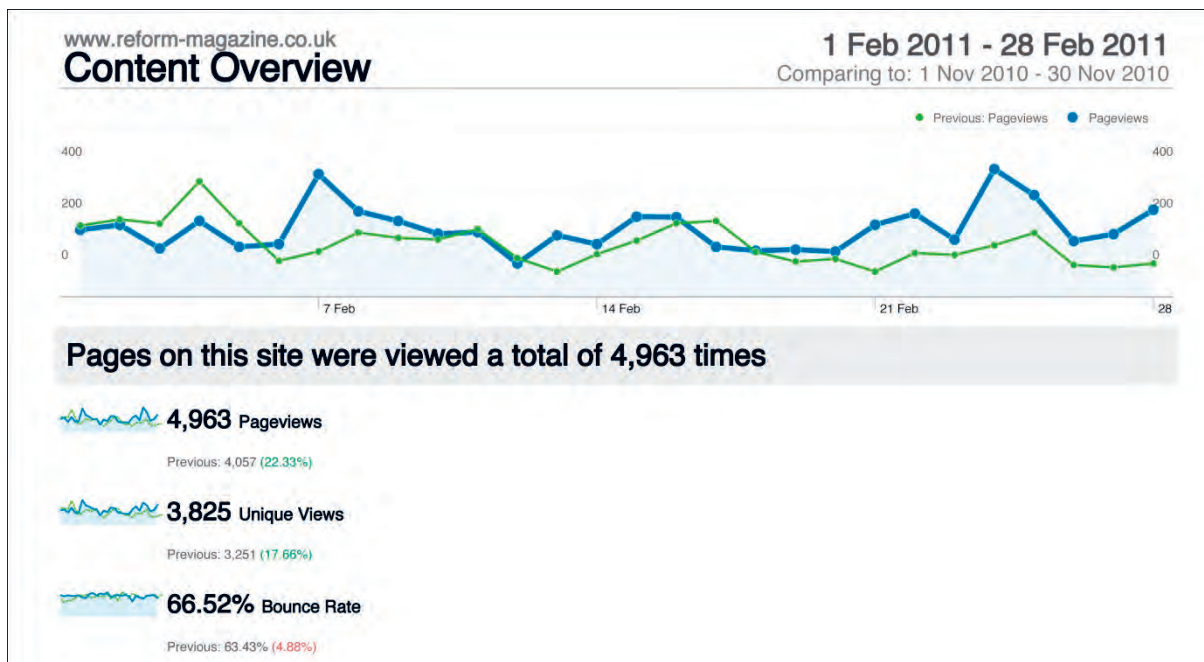
This is a very uncertain time for print communications. Most publications are struggling in an adverse economic environment but new media can work for as well as against printed publications. REFORM is learning to exploit and adapt to new technology.

We launched our own website in July 2010, to explore opportunities to increase the exposure of REFORM widely and cheaply. The website is attracting an increasing number of hits and we have a growing following on Twitter. Both complement one another to offer us a major new advertising platform for reaching new markets and potential readers at little or no cost.

Readers in other countries are beginning to write congratulating us on the website or on the messages they are picking up about us. This is a brand new area of work we hope to exploit fully over time.

We plan to explore options of charging for web content.

The challenge is to get viewers who don't know REFORM to land on the REFORM website. We have recently begun using Google facilities to optimise REFORM within web searches, and have joined Twitter, with a view to seeking potentially interested followers with the help of Tweet Adder. Within six weeks of joining Twitter, we had gained 700 followers, which means we have attracted 116 followers per week. We expect to have gained thousands of followers by the end of the year, a large proportion of whom will visit our website and learn about REFORM. Since enhancing our searches and joining Twitter in January, we have seen hits on the REFORM website (see graph below) and via-web subscriptions rise.



5. Summary

We have recognised the challenge REFORM faces both financially and in expanding the readership. Our costs are being cut back and we have embarked on a campaign to increase subscribers both within the church and among other denominations.

We believe the magazine is an essential mission tool for the URC. We have taken steps to address the understandable calls for more URC news. But REFORM also enhances the profile of the church and gives it a voice far beyond the URC community.

However, we know that, without the continuing subsidy from the URC, the magazine will not survive in its present form. We make the case that investment in REFORM is an investment in the life and voice of the URC.

**The United Reformed Church needs REFORM
REFORM needs the United Reformed Church.**

APPENDIX 2

A selection of URC reader feedback from the past 12 months

- [Irene Bound, reader, 9.03.11] “It’s an excellent magazine. I never used to read it straight away and pull out articles like I do now.”
- [Kim Fabricius, 5.02.11:] “Your work is absolutely superb; the URC has a magazine it can be really proud of.”
- [Joyce Perry, 29.01.11] “I have really appreciated recent editions of REFORM. The articles have been most interesting, informative and challenging. Keep it up.”
- [Jean Bancroft, 28.01.11:] “We are so pleased to see more space given to news from other churches! We find it very encouraging to see what is happening in other churches! So keep up the good work.”
- [Michael Hopkins, 27.01.11] “I greatly enjoyed REFORM in its re-launched format, and I am delighted with the Digest, which is a very welcome addition.”
- [Paul Fox, 23.11.10] “You have made it such an exciting, and interesting magazine. I always look forward to the next issue. It lives up to its statement on the cover - News, Comment, Inspiration, Debate.”
- [Brian Wren, 15.11.10:] “REFORM continues to shine. Thank you for your fine work as Editor. The October interview with Philip Pullman was especially helpful in adding a biblical scholar's voice to some of PP's viewpoints. Amid the realities of URC decline it is heartening to read REFORM's accounts of creative ministry and outreach. Thank you for sharing them.”
- [Davey Spens, 1.11.10:] “I love that you have created such a thoughtful publication, it feels genuinely refreshing.”
- [Donald Norwood, 29.10.10:] “Thanks again and as always for another sparkling issue of REFORM that arrived on our doorstep yesterday and has yet to be totally devoured!”
- [Odette Elliott 27.08.2010:] “Congratulations on REFORM. It is so full of interest these days.”
- [Brian King, 25.08.2010:] “REFORM is a reflection of a thoughtful, progressing denomination that values our inheritance and explores how we might progress to a contemporary deeper faith. Everyone I speak to about REFORM says how good it is now.”
- [Ken Pickering 14.06.2010:] “I hope I can begin by expressing my total admiration for what you have achieved with REFORM which I now read with enormous pleasure and use as a constant source of inspiration.”
- [Paul Fox and Brian King, 2.06.2010:] “the typography, the articles, everything! It's so good now it really is miles better than before.”
- [Kevin Snyman, URC training officer for South Wales 07.05.2010:] “REFORM is a shining light of fresh thinking and change in this Church.”
- [Richard Davis, retired URC minister, 09.04.2010] “May I take this opportunity to say ‘thank you’ for the regular high quality and breadth of the articles in REFORM. There was a time when I nearly despaired of it - I now actually look forward to its arrival.”

APPENDIX 3

Feedback from other denominations, conferences and the media

1. Anglicans

Where we have sent individual copies to Anglicans, when they contribute to the magazine for instance, we usually get positive responses:

- [Rob Shimwell, London, 27.02.11:] “I am a Church of England vicar in SE London who was sent a complimentary copy of Reform - which I greatly enjoyed.”
- [Stephen Cherry, Canon residentiary, Durham Cathedral, 25.2.11] “My copy of Reform arrived today. It is a very impressive magazine. Interesting, relevant content tremendously well presented.”
- [Andrew Clitherow, 03.09.2010, chaplain to the Queen:] “I am now a huge fan of the magazine. In a market where there is much mediocrity, your magazine shines out as an example of open minded, innovative, free-thinking excellence. I would imagine you attract readers by your strong inclusiveness.”
- [John Pritchard, bishop of Oxford 4.08.10:] “I’ve been very impressed with the magazine. You sent me two copies and I think the content, production values and substance are all excellent. I wish the CofE had something like it! Well done.”
- [Revd Dr Trystan Owain Hughes, Anglican Chaplain to Cardiff University, 25.08.10:] “I have been looking at the online editions, and I love the range of articles that you have in REFORM. I am, therefore, in the process of trying to persuade the Diocese to allow me to subscribe to it for the chaplaincy here at Cardiff University.”

2. Methodists and Baptists

We have had some positive anecdotal feedback from the Methodist Conference, where REFORM was displayed in 2009; congratulations on the magazine received from the editor of the Baptist Times, Mark Woods.

3. Colleges and conferences

Reference copies of REFORM have been requested by over 200 theology and religious education departments in schools, universities and teacher training colleges. Complimentary copies are also put into all URC training and resource centres. These copies help REFORM to extend its exposure and reach into new markets.

Copies of REFORM were requested by 16 major Christian conferences in 2010. So far in 2011, the magazine has gone to at least five (Student Christian Movement, World Council of Churches, two Spring Harvest events and JPIT) excluding URC Synod meetings, and Greenbelt this summer. This figure excludes smaller URC type events (approx 10 per year) such as those requested by individual churches.

Testimonials from conference organisers:

- [Hillary Topp, Student Christian Movement coordinator, 21.02.11:] “. We think it’s one of the best publications in the church press and we particularly like the diversity of contributors, the inclusion of younger voices, and the reflective theological content.”)

- From Clare Planner, Gold Key Media, 15.01.2010:] “The Business Director at Methodist International Conference Centre Hospitality said that they love REFORM magazine. They put copies in all the rooms and it is a really suitable title for their guests.”

4. Media

Many other Christian publications have recognized REFORM at various times.

Editors have:

- conveyed congratulations on particular articles or general praise (Baptist Times, Church Times, Inspire, Keep the Faith)
- reproduced whole articles or extracts or reported on them (Church Times, the Tablet, Ekklesia, Christianmagazineonline.com, many blogsites, many local URC magazines)
- reported our (one or two!) press releases (especially online mags and blogsites)
- asked us for interview contacts or photos after having read interviews in REFORM (Church Times, War Cry, Keep the Faith)

Recent media-related comments include:

- [4.1.11] We would like to do what we can to grow our contact with REFORM as we are in very many ways “fellow travellers”. I post URC news in our news brief section whenever I can (Jill Segger, Associate Editor, Ekklesia)
- [2.02.11] I am ...offering interviews to major Christian magazines with key authors. And, of course, you are one of the most major! (Ali Hull, publicist, Monarch Books)
- [7.02.11] Your magazine is by far the best quality of the Christian press. Plus you are willing to run items with a bit of gravitas... (Hazel Southam, journalist, freelance and journalist for the Bible Society)