

Paper C1

Communications committee

The future for *Reform*

United Church 2017
Church 2017
Reformed Church 2017
Church 2017

Paper C1

Communications committee

The future for *Reform*

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	Peter Knowles peter.knowles@bbc.co.uk
Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	Mission Council recognises the contribution of <i>Reform</i> to the life of the United Reformed Church as a tool of missional discipleship, and notes the commitment of the communications committee and staff team to continue developing and monitoring the use of <i>Reform</i> over the three-year period from January 2018 to December 2020. Mission Council therefore resolves to support <i>Reform</i> by continuing with the current annual subsidy – not to exceed £90,000 in any one budget year – for the next three budget years; and asks the communications committee to present up-to-date subscription numbers to Mission Council in May 2019.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	Report on progress made in the three-year campaign to increase sales of <i>Reform</i> and improve its finances; recommendation of continued support and investment.
Main points	Marketing work undertaken and planned by the communications department; subscription figures; financial information.
Previous relevant documents	Paper C3 at the November 2014 Mission Council; papers C1 and C2 at the March 2016 Mission Council.
Consultation has taken place with ...	The communications committee; the editorial board of <i>Reform</i> ; the finance department.

Summary of Impact

Financial	<i>Reform</i> continues to need financial investment from URC central funds. This amount remains within the £90,000 cap agreed by Mission Council and which ends on 31 December 2017. No increase in investment is needed, but an extension of the agreement is required.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	<i>Reform</i> is well read outside the denomination, but passing this resolution (and therefore supporting the continued development of <i>Reform</i>) will enable better promotion of the URC to ecumenical partners and members working in/attending LEPs.

The future for *Reform*

1. Background

- 1.1 Mission Council discussed the future for *Reform* in November 2014, and before that in May 2011. There was enthusiastic consensus that the magazine makes 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 – for a further three years. That period concludes at the end of 2017.
- 1.2 The communications committee submitted an interim report on *Reform*'s finances and subscriptions (papers C1 and C2) to Mission Council in March 2014.

2. The value of *Reform*

- 2.1 It was heartening for *Reform*'s staff, the communications team and the committee to hear Mission Council in 2014 celebrate the contribution that *Reform* makes to the denomination and express its desire that it continue to do so. The feedback that we have received since then tells the same story: *Reform* inspires and challenges readers, it provokes thought and debate, it keeps us all informed about the life of the URC, it resources local churches and adds something to our denominational identity. No other denomination has anything quite like it. And yet still not enough people buy it.
- 2.2 The added value *Reform* offers to the URC has continued to grow and develop in this three-year period. Ways in which this has happened include the following:
 - 2.2.1 Discussion materials for church groups are posted on the *Reform* website, to accompany articles in every issue, especially the 'Chapter and verse' Bible study. An anthology of 'Chapter & verse' columns is in preparation, to be published by the publications department – publication date not yet confirmed.
 - 2.2.2 The editorial board has been reinstated, with members from across the URC, giving regular feedback on how *Reform* is received in local churches and how well it is serving their needs.
 - 2.2.3 A clear trend in feedback to *Reform* revealed an appetite among readers for more good news stories about the work of local United Reformed churches. *Reform* began consciously to focus more on such stories in late 2016.
 - 2.2.4 A new column, 'I am...', began in September 2017, publishing the first-hand stories of people whom we are more used to hearing about than hearing from. This idea arose from discussion with the communications committee.
 - 2.2.5 The editor of *Reform* regularly preaches in churches, contributing to local church life and building relationships with *Reform*.
 - 2.2.6 *Reform* is one of the channels through which 'Walking the Way' will be promoted and engaged with in churches.
 - 2.2.7 The digital edition of *Reform*, launched in April 2015, offers alternative ways to read the magazine. The digital app is more accessible to people with vision impairment, and it comes with a searchable online archive.

- 2.3 The communications committee believes that the contribution of *Reform* to the mission, ministry and identity of the URC is well worth the annual investment that the denomination makes in it. *Reform* is not a money-making venture or a commercial enterprise, it is a tool for the mission and discipleship of the URC. We should not think of *Reform* simply in terms of its cost to the denomination, but as a part of our mission in which we invest like we would in any other.

3. The financial position

- 3.1 *Reform* continues to stay within the budget extended by Mission Council in 2014, although it comes close. It has not exceeded the £90,000 cap and is not expected to do so this year.

Annual net cost of Reform 2015-2017

2015	£88,571
2016	£88,172
2017 (budgeted net cost)	£88,200

- 3.2 At a time when other Christian publications such as *Third Way* and *Baptist Times* are no longer printed, it is something to be grateful for that the URC's magazine continues to be sustainable.
- 3.3 However, we cannot afford to be complacent about this. Because the margin is narrow, and because costs such as paper and postage are increasing all the time, *Reform* has taken a number of steps to lower its costs and increase its revenue. They include the following:
- 3.3.1 The editor has worked a nine-day fortnight from the start of 2017, resulting in a 10% saving in salary costs.
- 3.3.2 The other members of *Reform* staff do regular work for other teams in the communications department, so that a proportion of their salaries is paid from another part of the communications budget.
- 3.3.3 The price of an annual subscription to *Reform* was raised in December 2016 from £25 to £28. *Reform* worked with local church distributors to ensure that readers understood the reasons for the price rise and accepted it. This did not result in a significant drop in the number of subscribers. In the future we expect to see a small annual rise in the price of subscriptions rather than occasional larger increases; in December 2017 the subscription price will increase to £28.50.
- 3.3.4 The print run of *Reform* was reduced in November 2016 and again in August 2017.
- 3.4 The outcome of all this is that the communications committee is confident *Reform* can continue to serve discipleship and resource mission the URC in the same way, without any increase in the level of investment that Mission Council has agreed in the past.

4. Subscriptions figures from 2015 to 2017

- 4.1 The following chart shows the level of subscriptions to *Reform* over the three-year funding period which Mission Council granted to *Reform* in 2014:

Subscriptions to <i>Reform</i>	
March 2015	3,661
September 2015	4,108
March 2016	3,786
September 2016	3,765
March 2017	3,656
September 2017	3,669

- 4.2 We are disappointed not to have seen the growth in subscriptions to *Reform* that we hoped for in this period, despite the work done by the communications team to market the magazine. However, we are no longer seeing the precipitous decline of previous years, and the communications team continue to explore new ways of marketing *Reform* to new readers and lapsed subscribers (see section 5 below).

5. Marketing *Reform*

- 5.1 The communications committee reported to Mission Council in March 2016 (Paper C1) on the many *Reform* marketing campaigns launched over the previous year and a half. Since then communications staff have also introduced the following new marketing initiatives:
- Email campaign to lapsed subscribers;
 - Phone campaign to lapsed subscribers;
 - The message 'Read it, buy it, don't lose *Reform*' brought to Mission Council and reiterated in *Reform* and NU;
 - Daily updates on social media;
 - Presence at Greenbelt festival as part of the URC's associate partnership, with a special subscription offer for Greenbelters;
 - Stall at Christian Resources Exhibition, with a special subscription offer;
 - *Reform* had a stall and the Production and Marketing Officer made a presentation as part of the URC's Big Day Out;
 - Contra advertising arrangement with the rural church magazine *Country Way*;
 - Institutional subscriptions (accessible to all students) promoted to theological colleges;
 - A spin-off book of the column 'Jumble Sales of the Apocalypse' has been published. Other spin offs are in process;
 - A podcast of vox pops from *Reform* readers was recorded in July.
- 5.2 In addition to these new initiatives, other marketing work outlined in the March 2016 paper is also continuing.

6. Support *Reform*

- 6.1 While the communications committee is very glad that *Reform* does not need increased investment from the URC in order to be sustainable, we do need increased support of the denomination in other ways. We appeal to members of Mission Council to support *Reform* in the following ways:
- 6.1.1 Spread the message to your synods and churches: '*Reform* is there for you.' It is a resource for preachers, service leaders and house group leaders. It is a challenge to discipleship, an inspiration to mission and a guide to Christian life. Please publicise the fact that the URC offers this resource to local churches and encourage people to subscribe.
- 6.1.2 The other message is this: 'Read it. Buy it. Don't lose *Reform*.' We are delighted that people value *Reform* enough to share it widely, but the more that single copies are bought and passed around a church or photocopied for multiple readers, the harder it is to achieve financial sustainability. Please pass on the message that *Reform* needs subscribers.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 *Reform* continues to be valuable to the URC and worth the investment that the denomination makes in it. It should be seen not merely in commercial terms as a cost to the denomination, but in terms of missional discipleship as a tool for church life. Because of savings made, *Reform* also continues to be financially sustainable and operates within its budget. Therefore no increase in funding is necessary. The communications committee asks Mission Council to extend the level funding provided to *Reform* between 2014 and 2017 for a further three years.