

# Paper C3

Communications and editorial committee

The future for *Reform*

Church 2014  
**United**  
Church **Reformed**  
**Church** Church 2014



# Paper C3

## Communications and editorial committee: The future for *Reform*

### Basic Information

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<b>Action required</b>	Decision
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>Mission Council notes that the communications and editorial committee and staff team are focussed on increasing the number of subscriptions to the magazine, and committed to developing, and monitoring the use of, <i>Reform</i> within the United Reformed Church over the three-year period from January 2015 to December 2017. 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 and editorial committee to present up-to-date subscription numbers to Mission Council in March 2016.</b>
<b>Alternative options to consider, if any</b>	None

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	Updating Mission Council on <i>Reform's</i> place in the Christian publishing market – and its finances.
<b>Main points</b>	The current position of the magazine and plans for the short-to-medium term future plus the financial issues.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	None
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	The communications and editorial committee and the finance department.

### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	<i>Reform</i> continues to need some form of financial investment from URC central funds. However, it is important to note that <i>Reform</i> has only used the full amount of the subsidy, as agreed by Mission Council in 2011, in one of the three years since. <i>Reform</i> is committed to reducing production costs where possible and is working to increase revenue from advertisers and subscribers. It is also important to note that, if the departmental budget is cut significantly in 2016 or 2017 then the department spend on <i>Reform</i> will need to be reconsidered, alongside the other areas of work of the communications department.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	<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 (see the 'Marketing <i>Reform</i> ' section).

# The future for Reform

## 1. Introduction

Mission Council discussed *Reform* in May 2011, and agreed ‘a subsidy of £90,000 should be made available in the 2012 central budget but that, after adjustment for inflation, the annual subsidy should not exceed this level for at least the following two budget years.’ Since then, the committee has discussed the future of *Reform* in several meetings, and most recently, in light of the ongoing review of the communications department of Church House. As part of the review process, the communications and editorial committee have extensively discussed and evaluated *Reform* – this paper contains the committee’s thinking and conclusions.

## 2. The role of *Reform* in the life of the denomination

*Reform* plays a key role in the communications department and the delivery of its aims as outlined in the (draft) departmental mission statement, which reads:

‘The communications department exists to: promote effective communication and celebration of the Gospel in and beyond the United Reformed Church by:

- Giving voice to good news
- Facilitating regional/national communications
- Supporting the communications of Church House departments and General Assembly
- Resourcing the local churches.’

The committee believes that *Reform* has a significant part to play:

- In communicating information between local churches, and between local churches and the centre;
- As a forum for theological and spiritual conversations within the United Reformed Church (URC) and with our ecumenical partners;
- In never ceasing to explore what the Gospel is, what impact it has on our lives, what it has to say to our world and what it demands of us as followers of Christ.

The committee is enthusiastic and unequivocal in its support of *Reform*, viewing it as a valuable resource for the denomination, recognising its contribution as a forum for conversation across the whole breadth of the URC, and seeing it as a vehicle to both stimulate and inform mission, by, for example, publicising innovative local projects in its ‘Christian Activist’ column.

It must also be noted that *Reform* staff are all members of the communications department and regularly assist the work of the press and media and graphics offices.

## 3. Recent improvements

Having been developed, updated and redesigned under its previous and present editors, *Reform* compares well with the best publications in the Christian world. Flatteringly, elements of its new design have been emulated by other Christian magazines ... compare *Reform*’s ‘Month in Numbers’ and a ‘A Good Question’ – both launched in July 2013 – to the more recently introduced ‘Month in Figures’ in Premier’s *Christianity* and ‘The Big Question’ in *Life and Work*.

The theologian Robert Beckford recently said: ‘*Reform* is a prophetic voice’ and Christina Rees of the Church of England’s General Synod called it: ‘One of the most intelligent, relevant and helpful Christian publications around’.

And, as well as the very welcome comments from external supporters, *Reform* regularly receives compliments from the internal URC audience. For example:

‘*Reform* is OURS! ... a must read for Christians seeking to think critically and live faithfully.’  
(Michael Jagessar)

‘I am pleased to see that the breadth of theology in the URC is now being reported... I look forward to *Reform* continuing to represent the URC in all its diversity.’ (Richard Alford)

‘The diversity of opinions in *Reform* is representative of the cross-section of people that make up the family of the United Reformed Church... Read *Reform* and discover more about this church that nourishes us all in our pilgrimage of faith.’ (David Grosch-Miller)

‘*Reform* is our magazine, and it is great to see a broader representation of our theological spectrum. It really does feel like ‘ours’, rather than a niche group publication. Well done!’  
(Ashley Evans)

‘Its articles are so engrossing that three times I have missed my stop on the train journey home.’ (Roberta Rominger)

‘*Reform* magazine reads well, and reflects an increasingly wide set of opinions, which is healthy and makes all opinions well represented.’ (Norman Setchell)

And, speaking about the September 2014 issue: ‘Best edition yet, I reckon.’  
(Lawrence Moore).

#### 4. The breadth of the URC

Historically, not all parts of the denomination have felt equally well represented by *Reform*. This has changed as a result of the current editorial commitment to theological breadth and to providing a forum for diverse voices. It is our hope that the resultant magazine is one that the whole of the United Reformed Church can feel belongs to them.

#### 5. Budget

*Reform* is understandably vulnerable in the life of the denomination. The communication and editorial committee considers *Reform* to play an important role across the life of the URC, but has been realistic in its discussions around the magazine’s finances<sup>1</sup>. It is clear that *Reform* needs to increase its revenue – most obviously by increasing advertising sales and/or selling more subscriptions. We are not aiming to maintain the status quo.

However, it is worth pointing out that, since the Mission Council resolution of 2011, *Reform* has cut its production costs and has not used the whole amount of the agreed investment from central funds.

The communications department made large cutbacks during 2012. *Reform* made a considerable contribution to these savings and continues to make changes to keep costs down. As a result, in 2013 printing *Reform* cost 23% less than it did in 2009 (down from £41,641 to £32,052); distribution cost 13% less than in 2009 (down from £50,606 to £44,135); and marketing cost 38% less than in 2010 (down from £18,600 to £11,550).

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A – *Reform*’s budget

## 6. Marketing *Reform* and the drive to increase sales

In the recent past the *Reform* team – in line with the editorial changes that have resulted in a magazine with greater theological breath and appeal – have focused on marketing *Reform* to audiences outside of the denomination.

These initiatives have included: Regular marketing meetings focused on brainstorming new ideas for promoting *Reform*; the launch of a three-editions-for-the-price-of-one direct debit subscription offer; promoting the magazine at the Greenbelt Festival and the Christian Resources Exhibition; themed issues to better attract advertisers; advertising *Reform* online via websites such as shipoffools.com; and sending magazine samples to university Christian groups.

However, these initiatives have had limited success and we have recently changed the direction of our focus – plans to market the magazine to audiences within the denomination are now underway.

It is essential that we take steps to place *Reform* on a more stable financial footing, and it is our belief that URC congregations are the natural and most receptive group of potential new subscribers; so, in the future, marketing efforts will be concentrated internally. This change in focus will not affect the magazine's editorial commitment to theological breadth and broad Christian appeal.

Both the communications committee and department hope that Mission Council members will support this marketing focus by helping to promote the magazine to congregations who do not currently read or receive *Reform*.

Specific plans include:

- A digital version of *Reform* available in early 2015.
- Producing resources to help churches make the most of *Reform* (see the 'Enriching church life' section below)
- A marketing push within the URC, promoting *Reform* to congregations where members do not presently receive it. (Please note that the *Reform* office is always happy to supply sample copies of the magazine, in bulk if necessary – and if stock allows, so that potential subscribers can familiarise themselves with its content and make an informed decision about subscribing.<sup>2</sup>)
- A survey of URC members who don't yet subscribe to *Reform*.

## 7. Enriching church life

*Reform* is an underused resource in local churches and the committee is confident that it could be used as an effective tool in developing the faith of individuals and congregations. To this end, plans are being developed around producing a guide on how to use the magazine in services and small groups. Ideas that are being considered include: Using some of the shorter articles related to current events, such as the 'A Letter From...' column, to inform prayers; using the four-way debate of the 'A Good Question' feature in group discussions; and using feature articles for reading-group-style sessions.

The committee discussion on these ideas was particularly encouraging. There is no doubt that the committee is enthused by the range of ways that congregations can use *Reform* both within congregations and as an outreach tool.

<sup>2</sup> If you are interested in receiving complimentary copies of *Reform* for promotional purposes please contact Charissa King by emailing [reform@urc.org.uk](mailto:reform@urc.org.uk).

## 8. Conclusion

*Reform* is a valuable and well-loved resource for the spiritual lives of members and the mission of congregations – and is a resource that the United Reformed Church can be proud of and continue to support.

The committee, together with *Reform's* staff team and the head of communications, is completely committed to developing *Reform's* potential and increasing its income but recognises that developing the magazine in the ways detailed in this paper will take time – and thus asks for Mission Council's support for the next three years.

## Resolution

**Mission Council notes that the communications and editorial committee and staff team are focussed on increasing the number of subscriptions to the magazine, and committed to developing, and monitoring the use of, *Reform* within the United Reformed Church over the three-year period from January 2015 to December 2017. Mission Council therefore resolves 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; and asks the communications and editorial committee to present up-to-date subscription numbers to Mission Council in March 2016.**

## Appendix A – Reform’s draft income and expenditure account to June 2014

	2013 (Jan-Dec)	2014 (Jan-Jun)			2014	2015
	Actual £	Actual £	Budget £	Variance £	Budget £	Draft Budget £
<b>Reform Magazine</b>						
<b>Budget holder – Gill Nichol</b>						
<b>Staff costs</b>	128,859	65,640	65,250	390	130,500	133,400
<b>Office and Equipment</b>	1,593	490	1,250	(760)	2,500	2,500
<b>Magazine Production/ Marketing</b>						
Advertising commission	12,099	4,496	5,000	(504)	10,000	10,000
Subscription collection costs	9,919	5,573	5,000	573	10,000	10,000
Contributors fees	3,278	1,501	2,000	(499)	4,000	4,000
Images and illustrations	1,852	1,336	1,750	(414)	3,500	3,000
Marketing and promotional	11,550	3,867	3,500	367	7,000	7,000
Distribution (inc inserts/packing)	44,135	18,942	17,500	1,442	35,000	36,000
Printing of <i>Reform</i>	32,052	14,067	15,000	(933)	30,000	32,000
Editorial – board and other	200	92	0	92	500	1,000
	115,084	49,873	49,750	123	100,000	103,000
<b>Total costs</b>	245,536	116,004	116,250	(246)	233,000	238,900
<b>Income:</b>						
Subscriptions	(115,529)	(49,538)	(60,000)	10,463	(120,000)	(115,000)
Advertising	(44,015)	(17,985)	(20,000)	2,015	(40,000)	(40,000)
Royalties	0	(220)	0	(220)	0	0
<b>Total Income</b>	(159,544)	(67,742)	(80,000)	12,258	(160,000)	(155,000)
<b>Net cost/ (contribution)</b>	<b>85,992</b>	<b>48,262</b>	<b>36,250</b>	<b>12,012</b>	<b>73,000</b>	<b>83,900</b>



## Appendix B – Subscriptions

The staff of *Reform* has worked hard to increase subscription sales, but we recognise that more is needed in order to make it sustainable.

At present, 9,000 copies of each edition are printed. The breakdown of this print run is as follows:

- 4,125 copies are distributed to subscribers (as of 2 September 2014)
- 500 copies are sent to the *Reform* editorial office (for the Church House reception area display, for circulation amongst Church House staff and meeting rooms, and for archiving, storage and promotional copy placement purposes)
- 420 copies are sent out for free each month to synod offices and training centres including the Windermere Centre, Scottish College, Luther King House, Crossways and Keld
- 120 copies are sent to the offices of our fulfilment partners – advertising and subscription fulfilment teams (where they are then sent on to potential advertisers and subscribers who may have missed their delivery or want to purchase back issues)
- 35 copies are sent to Christian bookshops on a sale or return basis
- 2,000 copies are sent by request to conference centres, university RE departments, libraries, and medical centre waiting areas
- The remainder are used for marketing initiatives such as the Christian Resources Exhibition and Greenbelt, where they are distributed for free.

The advertising revenue gained as a result of this free distribution helps to keep down the cover price for subscribers.

In the 12 months between July 2013 and July 2014, the number of subscribers fell, from 4,549 to 4,118 – a net decrease of 431 in one year. (By comparison, between July 2008 and July 2013, the number of subscribers fell by 2,920 – an average of 584 per year.)

A more detailed breakdown of subscription sales between July 2013 and July 2014 is as follows: *Reform* gained 280 new subscribers, but lost 219 individual subscribers and 492 subscribers in church block subscriptions. The number of subscribers rose slightly month by month, but dropped dramatically around December 2013, as it does every year, when church block subscriptions expire.