

Dealing with the media

A short guide for United Reformed churches



The United Reformed Church



Introduction

This short guide has been put together to help churches engage actively with the media, using it to promote their church and all that it is and does.

So, why bother with the media? There are at least four core reasons:

- To have your say
- To promote good news
- To restore the perspective: God is not dead!
- To correct incorrect reporting.

The material presented here was initially written for use within media training sessions run by the United Reformed Church media team.

We anticipate that this booklet will be used primarily as a resource to supplement the training sessions we deliver – but it clearly has a wider reach too. We hope any churches who perhaps feel a little intimidated by the prospect of dealing with journalists will discover that the rewards can be surprisingly good for surprisingly little effort: If you want some positive press coverage – a letter in a national broadsheet, a spot on local radio – read on.

This guide covers four main areas: getting your good news out; working out the most appropriate medium for your news and less news-oriented stories; writing letters to the editor; and handling bad news.

Many churches already enjoy strong relationships and professional dealings with the media; but these things are within the grasp of any and every church where ministers and volunteers are willing to learn the ropes.

This booklet has been written both to encourage you and to share some of the basic tools and information you will need to take the first steps on your media journey.

Gill Nichol

Head of communications

The United Reformed Church, October 2014

Media Relations: Getting the good news out

All churches have good news stories that can be shared with others. These stories can range from the appointment of a new minister of Word and sacrament or church related community worker to the commissioning of a new building or the launch of a parents' and carers' drop-in. Often that news remains buried and is never shared outside of the Sunday congregation (or not shared at all). And that's a waste.

In this first section we're going to look at how the humble news release comes into its own as an instrument of getting your good news out. Given all the other modern and arguably more sophisticated communications methods available to us, the news release is still one of the best tools and one that churches are well-advised to master.

Is this news?

So, how to write a news release? The first and most crucial step is to decide whether or not your story is actually news, by using the checklist below:

- It is about something local and relevant for local people (and the people it affects the bigger the story)
- News is something new! 'Church launches building appeal' is news; 'Church building appeal ongoing' is not
- News is about something out of the ordinary, not something everyday: 'Clowns come to church service' is news; 'Minister leads church service' is not
- It's more likely to get press coverage if the story is visual and suggests a photo: 'Minister against unjust trade' is not news; 'Minister begins seven day vigil on church roof in support of fair trade' is
- News is about both people and events but human interest stories have greater appeal.

Top Ten Tips on writing a media release

1. Ask yourself, 'Is this really news?'
2. Check the deadlines in target media – prepare the release in advance
3. Remember the 5 W's:
 - WHAT the event was
 - WHEN it happened
 - WHERE it took place
 - WHO was involved?
 - WHY it was important?
4. Spend time on your opening sentence – it should sum up your story. Give detail and be accurate
5. Avoid jargon, acronyms and church-y language (terms like synod and Mission Council should not be used without an explanation, acronyms must be explained and avoid clichés like 'We were truly blessed' and 'Let's share...')
6. Include quotes, and attribute them – they'll help bring your story alive.
7. Keep it short – one/one and a half sides of A4 at a maximum
8. Check spelling and grammar very carefully
9. Where appropriate, include a photo or a photo opportunity – a good photo can make the story
10. Include full contact details (name, email address and at least one phone number) for someone who is available during the normal business day.

Sending out your release

- Do this as soon as you can. If something happened on 8 March, and you are sending the release on 15 March, that's not news – it's old news! Aim to send it within 24 hours of the event happening
- If you want the media to attend the event/or cover it before it happens, aim to give at least two weeks notice
- Email (or fax/post) to named contact. Call the newspaper, radio station or whatever to find out who the relevant reporter is. Avoid sending your release to 'the news desk'
- Include a brief description of the story in your email subject box
- Do not send the release as an attachment.

Sample news release

Below is an example of a news release that was written specifically for local media. It's been marked up so you can easily see what the essential component parts are.

NEWS RELEASE 1¹

7 November 2012²

1. *It's good practice to describe what you are sending.*

2. *Make sure you include the correct date.*

Cullompton church minister initiates pub talks on life, faith, and everything³

3. *Include a catchy/descriptive headline, and a larger font size than the body text.*

A local church minister is hoping that The Pony and Trap pub on Exeter Hill, Cullompton will be filled with the sounds of conversation, debate and engagement as she hosts a series of three discussion groups in the run-up to Christmas. The first will take place at 7.45pm on Wednesday 16 November.⁴

4. *The first paragraph should include the nub of the story.*

The Revd Janet Sutton Webb, a pioneer church minister from the United Reformed Church, describes "Open Talk" sessions as: "Music inspired conversations about life, faith and everything." Using a song as a conversation starter, participants will be invited to contribute to a debate inspired by the lyrics. The topical theme of the first session is Money, with Pink Floyd's classic '70s hit providing the inspiration. The sessions are free and open to anyone over the age of eighteen.⁵

5. *The main content of the story should include a quote and expand on the "why" of the story.*

Explaining why she decided to launch the group, Ms Sutton Webb said: "I was really keen to provide a place where people could meet and talk in-depth about the social issues that are important to them. There seem to be fewer and fewer opportunities to participate in meaningful debate – to take the time to listen to the viewpoints of others and wrestle with issues that affect us all."

She continues: "It could be argued that the ongoing Occupy protest at St Paul's Cathedral crystallises the questioning of the economic and social system most of us just accepted. It provokes questions about the place of

greed in our society, and challenges us to think about how we care for the most poor and vulnerable in our communities.

“Using song lyrics as the starting point provides Open Talk with an accessible way to complex subjects. I am really excited about this group and would encourage people to book the dates into their diary now – and come along for some great conversation in a convivial setting.”

The venue for all three Open Talk evenings is The Pony and Trap pub on Exeter Hill, Cullompton and all three will start at 7.45pm – on Wednesday 16 November, Wednesday 30 November and Wednesday 14 December. The sessions are expected to last around an hour and a half. ⁶

6. In the final paragraph sum up the story.

For more information please contact: ⁷

Janet Sutton Webb

T: 00000 000000

E: minister@email.com

7. Always give full contact details of someone who is available in business hours.

8. Notes for editors are useful and give context. You are welcome to use the note on the URC, used here. A smaller font size is used.

NOTES FOR EDITORS ⁸

- **Open Talk** is a series of three open discussion sessions based on the format developed by Serum, a discussion forum based in London. For more information go to <http://www.moot.uk.net/2010/09/01/serum/>.
- **The Revd Janet Sutton Webb** is a pioneer minister working through the United Reformed Church minister. For more information please see: link to
- **The United Reformed Church** comprises one hundred thousand people in 1600 congregations. It has brought together English Presbyterians, English, Welsh and Scottish Congregationalists and members of the Churches of Christ. Worldwide, more than 80 million Christians are members of the Reformed family of churches, the largest Protestant tradition. The name ‘Reformed’ is used because the churches began to emerge with reform movements in the sixteenth century. www.urb.org.uk

Finding a home for your story

News stories are the most obvious channel for getting media interest in your church – but what if your church has something interesting or useful to say that isn't really 'news'?

Any media mention of your church – its people, activities, history or outlook – could raise awareness and help you reach out to new individuals and groups. It might be anything, from a tiny event notice in your local paper to a feature interview with your minister on the Radio 4 Sunday programme.

The key thing is to find the right home for your message. It's not enough to identify a target newspaper, magazine, TV or radio station; you must familiarise yourself with, and then aim for, an appropriate slot within your chosen publication or channel.

It helps to think consciously of what distinguishes these different slots, so you can check you are targeting the right one and make sure you meet the criteria when submitting something. Here's an at-a-glance reminder of some common basic categories and what they involve:

News

Factual, objective and timely reporting on real-life events. Where opinions are included, they are balanced with the other side of the story.

Opinion/comment

Driven entirely by a point of view, be it a serious political perspective or a humorous observation.



Reviews

Critical reflection on, or overview of, a new thing – whether a book, play, CD etc.

Features

Explore a subject or issue in more depth than news, though features may or may not be news-focused. Features are often driven by interview/s, debate or an unfolding story.

Notices

Convey brief messages – often about events, services or projects where participation is desired. Sometimes secured with a small payment, they appear in many kinds of newspapers and magazines.

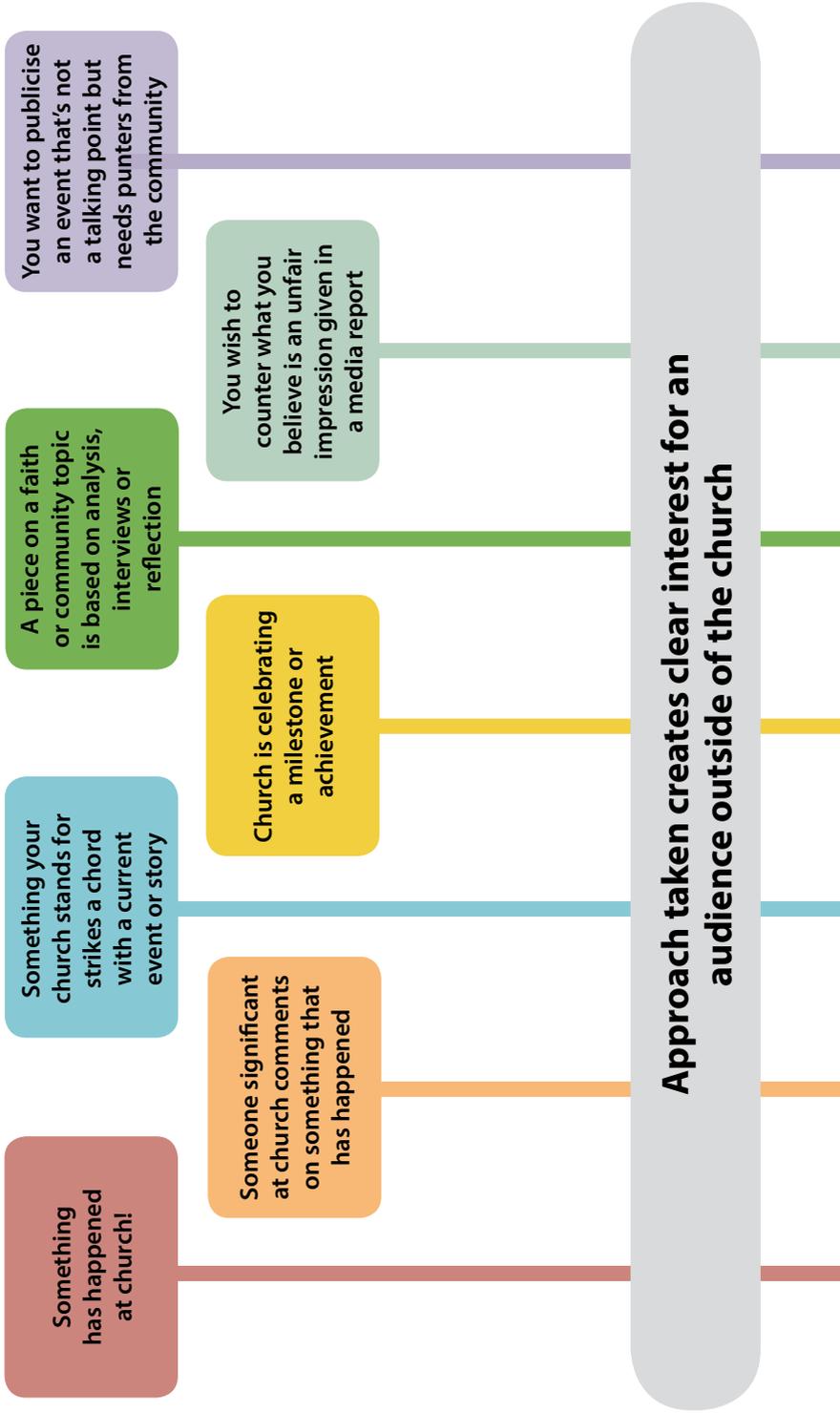
Readers'/listeners' letters/emails

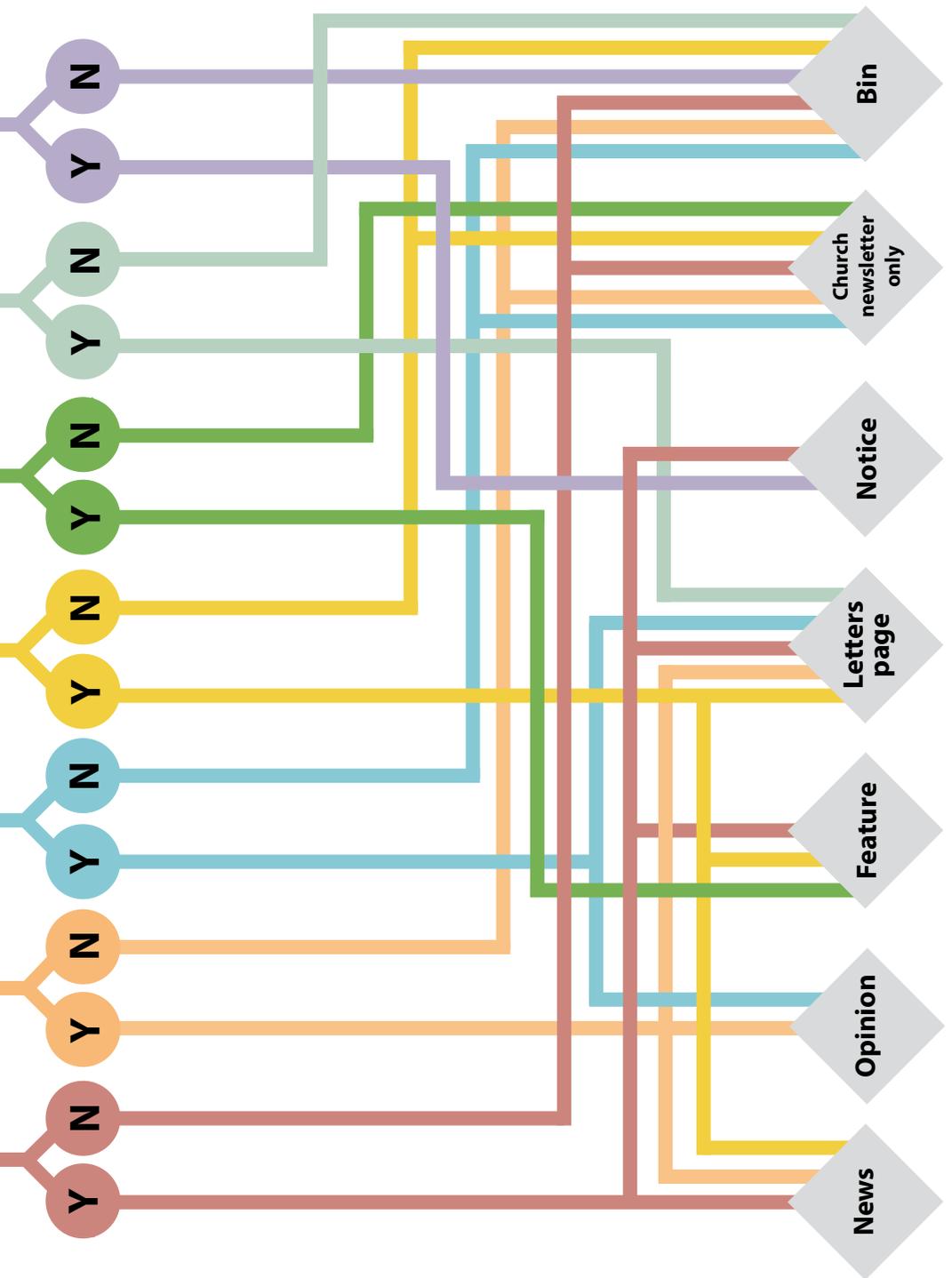
Have a brief point to get across, usually in response to something. Most often, they express a perspective on a story in the publication, or on a wider current topic. (See also page 14.)

You'll find examples of most of these generic categories across a range of traditional media: local, regional and national newspapers, magazines and radio stations. Of course, their content and style will vary enormously from medium to medium.

Generally, there will be more openings for submitting your own material to the various slots in newspapers and magazines than in broadcast media. There your job will generally be to interest a broadcast journalist in covering your idea.

Where to put your story





Winning ways

Here are a few top tips for winning non-news-related media exposure for your church:

1. Get to know your target slot

There is no point firing off a 1,000-word opinion piece to the comment editor of a magazine if they only publish 400-word articles written by in-house regulars. Take the time to study several examples of the article or programme-type you are targeting and make sure your submission fits the length, tone and content.

2. Use your niche

Every journalist is told to find their niche. Your church has a niche already – faith and community. So look out for opportunities to capitalise on it. If your minister or one of your elders or other active members is a good writer or speaker, you can put them forward as an interviewee or an opinion piece author on a faith or community topic: inter-faith tensions, homelessness, street pastoring, or whatever. Readers and listeners want to hear from people with some kind of expertise, authority or close connection to a subject.

3. Grab low-hanging fruit

If you look around your local media, you might find some slots are simply waiting to be grabbed. Make it a rule to send regular 'What's on' stories and event notices to any local newspapers and magazines that run them. A brief mention can be as effective as flowing prose in getting people interested in what's going on at your church.

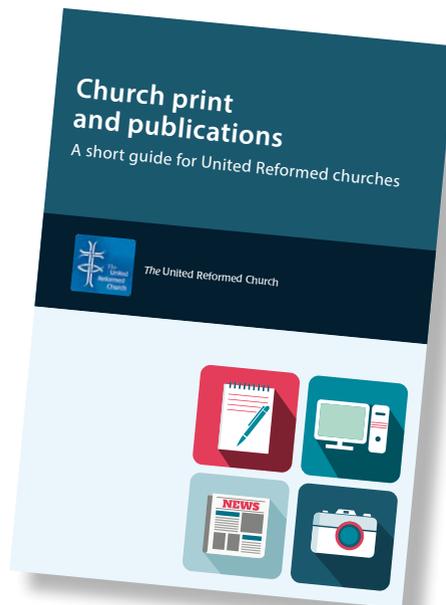
4. Push your people

You don't need to wait for a burning issue to come along before asking your minister or one of your members to step up to the plate. Most church families include individuals with charisma or a strong voice that could help get your

church a mention in the media, even when nothing particularly notable is going on. If your minister is well-known and liked in the community, you could probably clinch them a regular column in a local magazine or newspaper. Or offer them up for an ‘in the papers’ discussion panel if your local or regional radio station has one. You may discover that one of your elders already writes reviews or gardening pieces for a local or special-interest publication. Might it be appropriate for them to include their church connection in their author biography?

5. Be realistic

Sometimes we just have to face it: what we thought was a great idea for a story turns out to have no media interest value at all. Ask yourself the tough questions and be open to this reality before you go to the trouble of pitching. Indeed, even if you have pitched your piece with confidence, be prepared for rejection; it happens to everyone. Just pick yourself up, dust your piece down and ask yourself – could this find a home in the church newsletter? (*For guidance on producing church newsletters, see our Church print and publications booklet.*)



Writing letters

Every editor wants a strong letters' page bursting with lively opinions and observations – like the ones in *Reform* magazine! But it's not something they can always boast – which is where you come in... Writing to local (or national) newspapers and magazines is an often-overlooked way to get your point of view across. Before you put pen to paper, read through these tips for writing letters – and, equally importantly, note our list of common mistakes that will make sure your letter ends up on the trash pile.

Ten winning tips

1. Editors look first for opinionated comments about stories in their publication. Use the story as your hook.
2. They also look for letters on relevant current events not yet covered in their pages – another hook for your story.
3. Remember, adding a church voice to a topical debate is worthwhile for its own sake – not just when you want to promote your church event/achievement.
4. Make a timely contribution to an existing letters page debate – but get in quick before it's gone off the boil!
5. End with impact – perhaps a demand, a prediction or a proclamation. Go on, be opinionated!
6. Be nice! Wit and humour are the best weapons.
7. Signing off with the name of an organisation lends significance to a letter. A great opportunity for your church – IF you have a genuine comment to share.

8. Do your homework – address your letter to the correct person; stick to word limits; get it in on time.
9. If it's a great letter that fits another publication, perhaps for a different reason, modify it and use it again!
10. A published letter in a decent magazine or newspaper = good news! Tell people about it, on your website, in your newsletter, or through social media.

Common pitfalls: How to make sure your letters bomb

1. Send off your missive without studying the target publication and the kind of letters they publish.
2. Forget the word limits – they can't possibly apply to you!
3. Offer a 'just because' essay on the history of your church.
4. Attempt to clinch a free advert for your church event.
5. Present a wide-ranging critique of six articles in the publication.
6. Get personally abusive/sarcastic.
7. Contribute more of the same to an ageing debate
8. Make unsubstantiated claims about a person, organisation or published article.
9. Ramble on for a bit – they are they experts after all, they can do the deciphering and editing!
10. Send in a brilliant, pertinent letter – a day too late for press, or without including your name and address.

Dealing with bad news

So far, we've been occupied with finding opportunities for media exposure. But, at the other end of the media-relations spectrum, there may be times when the press call you – and you'd rather they hadn't. Hopefully you won't need the advice that follows – but you might, and that's why it's here.

In many ways, the mechanics of dealing with bad or difficult news are easier than the mechanics of promoting your good news. That's because, in the first instance, what you need to do is tell someone else: the church minister, the synod moderator, and the URC press and media office at Church House.

When the church is at the centre of a story

- If you have to deal with bad news, and you know it's coming, let the minister and the synod moderator know and make sure that the URC press and media office is also properly briefed – contact them via the Church House switchboard on 0207 7916 2020 or, if out-of-hours and urgent, on the press office mobile 07976 753950. They may agree that you direct all press enquiries to them – this will give you a buffer zone and help you manage any journalists calling you
- Never refuse to talk to the press
- Avoid monosyllabic answers and 'no comment'
- Ask them which questions they want answered and then think carefully about your answers
- Don't be afraid to ask the journalist to give you five minutes to collect your thoughts or even prepare a written statement
- Get their direct line and call them back when you said you would
- Don't be intimidated – remember, they want your help
- Ask them to read back quotes.

Making a comment

- If you are commenting on the death of someone connected with your church, respect their right to privacy. Newspaper readers don't have the right to know every last thing about the life of the dead person – factual information is sufficient
- When commenting in the wake of death, injury or illness, always begin your quote with an appropriate expression of sympathy
- Don't seek to attach blame to others – for example, if there has been a mugging in the church yard, don't ascribe blame to the victim who was walking through a dark place on a winter night
- Show Christian love and compassion. Think of this as a witness opportunity (but avoid sounding overly pious!)
- Try and be helpful to the journalist – like you, they are just doing their job
- Take the opportunity start building a relationship with the journalist – you want them on your side.

When dealing with a criminal prosecution

Journalists should not contact you for a quote if the church is at the centre of, for example, a child abuse case, or anything else that becomes a criminal prosecution. In such cases, in order to help ensure a fair trial, the law forbids any expanding of a news story as soon as someone is charged for a crime (or a warrant for an arrest is made). Likewise, no mention of the case can be made in your church newsletter.



This booklet is part of a series on church communications published by the communications department of The United Reformed Church. Titles currently available are:

- **Dealing with the media**
- **Church print and publications**
- **Social media guidelines for the United Reformed Church.**

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