

Paper K3

Involvement with the Welcome Directory

URC Youth Assembly

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Maya Withall, National Synod of Scotland maya.withall@gmail.com Jay Tynan, North Western Synod
Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 50 General Assembly encourages local churches to work with the Welcome Directory, in line with guidance in the URC's safeguarding Good Practice document, to help prison leavers with joining faith communities.</p> <p>Resolution 51 General Assembly strongly encourages local churches who feel able to join the Welcome Directory and for local churches, Synods and General Assembly to look into how churches can be supported in their involvement.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	Encouraging local URC's to sign up to the Welcome Directory and work in line with the URC's safeguarding policy to welcome prison leavers.
Main points	Encouraging local URC's who feel able to get involved with the Welcome Directory.
Previous relevant documents	N/A
Consultation has taken place with...	URC Youth Executive URC Youth Assembly 2025 Faith in Action Committee John Bradbury – URC General Secretary URC Head of Safeguarding URC Safeguarding Committee

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (eg ecumenical)	

Introduction

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself” Luke 10:27.

From URC Youth Assembly 2025:

This motion was brought to Youth Assembly in 2025 and was discussed at length. A number of concerns were raised and have been considered in the construction of this resolution.

“Encouraging the URC to be involved in the Welcome Directory: Youth Assembly encourages local churches to work with the Welcome Directory to help prison leavers with rejoining faith communities. Youth Assembly also asks the Mission Committee, with the help of URC Youth, to bring a resolution to General Assembly to support this.”

Proposer: Jay Tynan – GA & AE Representative; North Western Synod

Second: Maya Withall – URC Youth Assembly Moderator Elect; National Synod of Scotland.

This was passed by consensus at Youth Assembly 2025.

What is the Welcome Directory?

The Welcome Directory is a multi-faith organisation which maintains a directory of registered faith communities, across England and Wales, who have declared their commitment to welcoming prison leavers and provide them with appropriate support. This directory is used by prison chaplains, probation workers and prison leavers themselves so they can identify communities upon their release from prison who are openly welcoming. The directory is in every prison across England and Wales.

It is estimated that each year 8,000 people who practice a form of faith on the ‘inside’ once released from prison do not go on to join faith communities. While this can be for a range of reasons, one reason is that many faith communities are nervous about encouraging prison leavers to join them and feel ill equipped to provide the appropriate support.

By getting involved in the Welcome Directory these faith communities will not be working alone to welcome prison leavers, rather they would work with the Welcome Directory to enable these people to continue to practice their faith. The URC have robust safeguarding processes in place to welcome those that could pose a risk and are being released from prison to join its churches in a safe way, therefore any person attending a URC via the Welcome Directory would be supported through our safeguarding processes and policies.

What type of prison leavers are involved in the welcome directory?

Individuals will be leaving prison following various lengths of sentences and for a vast array of convictions. Each person who is released from prison and would like to attend a URC would be supported to do so safely by the Synod Safeguarding Officer who will liaise with the individual, the local church and other professionals to ensure the risk is appropriately assessed and managed.

Safeguarding

For a community to register for the Welcome Directory there are four requirements:

1. **Safeguarding policy** – promotes an active safeguarding culture within a local faith community. This policy must be happening in practice, as well as on paper with a named lead and an active culture of safeguarding. Each local URC is required to have a safeguarding policy with a named safeguarding officer. The URC also has the Good Practice safeguarding document which covers supporting those that the Welcome Directory support.
2. **Permission** – permission from a senior faith leader (or multiple faith leaders). The Elders' [meeting] would need to support the church registering with the Welcome Directory.
3. **A point of contact, a 'champion'** – someone with a passion for the project and is happy to be a main point of contact for prison leavers wishing to connect with the faith community. This could be the church safeguarding coordinator or another individual appointed by the Elders meeting.
4. **Prior experience** – it is recommended that the congregation wishing to get involved has prior experience. This can be through working or volunteering in a prison or helping out in their community. For congregations without prior experience the Welcome Directory runs free online courses, every quarter allowing interested individuals to get experience. A three-session Prison Awareness Course is available, [this as insertion] involving experienced prison and community chaplains to learn about life in prison, life after release and how we can welcome prison leavers. Any person wanting to attend the church via the Welcome Directory would be supported by the SSO who is experienced. However, the point of contact champion should attend the Welcome Directory training.

Types of leavers

- Low to medium risk – do not need to disclose that they have been to prison unless the church requires them to disclose it
- High risk (violent crimes) – a person of high risk would not attend the church without the church leader and members of the community being aware.

The URC already has in place robust safeguarding procedures for high-risk offenders, which are managed by synod safeguarding offers in partnership with local churches.

Scottish Equivalent

Sadly, the Welcome Directory only operates in England and Wales and as such Scottish URC's will be unable to get involved with the Welcome Directory's work. There is nothing the URC can do as the Welcome Directory is an external agency and they do not have the resources to extend their work into Scotland. However, General Assembly still encourages churches in the National Synod of Scotland to get involved with work of this kind in whatever capacity this may be.

URC Involvement

Four URC congregations are already signed up to be part of the Welcome Directory:

- Abbey United Reformed Church, Romsey
- Christ Church United Reformed Church, Rayleigh
- Northgate United Reformed Church, Darlington
- St Columba's URC

URC's experiences with the Welcome Directory

Christ Church URC on the Welcome Directory:

“When our Church Meeting discussed it, one of the elderly Stalwarts (who is sadly now deceased) said ‘if we call ourselves Christians, why are we even discussing this!’ And of course, Jesus came to free prisoners, so it is a Christian mandate to help prisoners, and the Welcome Directory provides a way to do that while still meeting safeguarding concerns.”

Abbey URC on the Welcome Directory:

“Abbey URC Romsey decided to get involved in this outreach possibility following a visit from a Chaplain of Winchester Prison who led a Sunday morning service here. After his talk/ sermon he asked whether the congregation had any questions to ask him, and one asked how the church could be involved in helping ex-offenders, to which he replied, “Consider including your church in the Welcome Directory”. Elders’ and Church Meeting discussions followed over the next few months, and a subsequent Church Meeting voted to be listed. We have yet to be approached by an ex-offender, but Welcome Directory resources have prepared us well to do so as and when the opportunity arises.”

Case Study

Note: this example is provided by the Welcome Director and URC safeguarding procedures would need to be followed.

About my faith/belief community

We are a Christian faith community, based in three different locations. Our congregation ranges from students and young adults to families and older people across our locations. Our church provides free meals to disadvantaged households, a youth club and helps unemployed young people find work. We’ve been working across two prisons, giving donations, running bible studies classes and visiting people. The main prison we’re connected to is a remand prison. We registered with The Welcome Directory in 2023.

How we’ve supported prison leavers

We didn’t have many prison leavers coming to our faith community initially, but through our work in prisons they got to know us and recently more have been coming. Prison leavers are encouraged to be involved in volunteering with the church, such as helping with maintenance and decorating work as well as serving at the café. Some have found freelance work through us or have used their existing skills to help the church. We also offer practical help like applying for benefits and housing.

The difference our work has made

For some prison leavers, being involved in a faith community is part of something bigger. There are people who’ve struggled with addiction for years and being part of a faith community has helped them to be released from that, alongside support groups like AA and NA. For others, participating in a faith community is reintegrating back into society. Being seen as a part of society, rather than someone on the outskirts.

I believe that a good welcome is...

Knowing that we’re there for them. Some people may never ask for help and we need to say “this is what we can do, would you like that?” Realising that some people are being released, it might be the first time in years where they’ve had to think about what time they are going to get up and what they are going to do that day.

The most important thing I've learnt is...

We're all in the same boat. In secular society, prison leavers are in one group and the rest of society is in another, because "you've committed a crime and I haven't". In Christianity we're all fallible and we all need a saviour. That puts us on a level playing field.

I've also learnt that working with prison leavers requires patience and persistence. I love the phrase 'high support, high challenge'. There's a time to sit back and let someone settle in and there's a time to encourage them to take on a new challenge, if there is an opportunity for change or involvement or an opportunity to get someone into work.

Disclaimer: This case study represents the individual's views, and not the views of their organisation.