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Becoming a **WISE** Congregation for Mental Health

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United Church of Christ
**MENTAL HEALTH
NETWORK**



UCC Mental Health Network

Welcoming • Inclusive • Supportive • Engaged

Introduction



Alan Johnson proposing the WISE Congregations for Mental Health resolution at the UCC's 2015 General Synod.

The WISE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged) Congregation for Mental Health Resolution was adopted at the United Church of Christ General Synod in 2015. The United Church of Christ Mental Health Network then developed the WISE Certification process. **The objective of WISE is to encourage our congregations to become more welcoming of those living with mental health challenges**, to expand our inclusion of those who are living with mental health challenges, to be supportive of all who are affected by mental health conditions, and to engage in ways to live our commitment to be WISE about mental health.

Since **one in four individuals lives with a diagnosable mental health condition**, it's safe to say that individuals in your congregation are dealing with any variety of mental health and substance use challenges every day. Due to stigma, **many of these people may be reluctant to either seek help professionally or speak about it with their pastor or other members of their church**. However, an atmosphere of openness and acceptance in a congregation makes members, friends, and visitors more likely to feel safe and free from judgment. This acceptance and sense of safety can help create a place of belonging, where truly everyone, no matter where they are on life's journey, is welcome.

The purpose of this booklet is to serve as a guide for congregations in the process of becoming WISE about mental health, or simply exploring what being a WISE church is all about. The 10 Steps to Becoming a WISE Congregation, as well as all the other information here, are all meant to be used as tools to assist in this process.

We have also included a Valuable Resources page at the end of the booklet, an additional source of information for individuals and congregations. While not an exhaustive list, it does include many mental-health-related websites considered valid references.

Thank you for taking the time to explore what being WISE is all about.

Welcome to Your WISE Journey

The United Church of Christ Mental Health Network

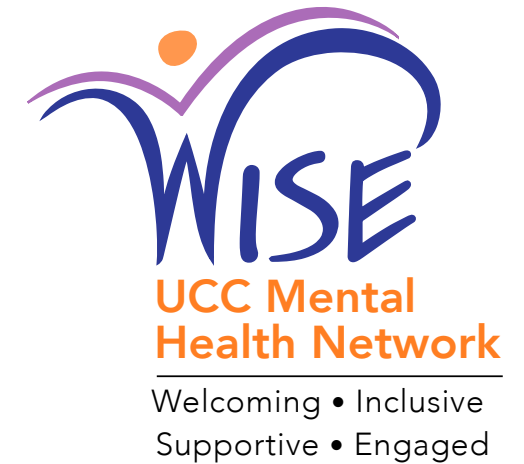
10 Steps to Becoming a WISE Congregation

How does mental health become a concern or a focus of our congregation's ministry that we can address and understand?

Usually these concerns come to the surface because of a personal experience, hearing a story or two about mental health challenges, learning about the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network (UCC MHN), focusing on WISE after the WISE General Synod Resolution was adopted in 2015, or reading about a situation in your town or community where mental health has become news. However it happens, the UCC MHN has resources for you to build on those experiences so that your faith community can begin or continue to become WISE about mental health. **This guidebook offers steps, possible actions, resources, encouragement, and connections for you as you start your journey to become WISE.**

This is an opportunity to create your own process to become WISE. Becoming a WISE-designated faith community requires a congregational vote. In particular, preparation for the vote includes education and programs to raise awareness. The 10 steps are one way to proceed. We welcome your experiences as you engage with mental health concerns. **This section offers guidance that any faith community can follow to become a WISE Congregation**, but it need not be done in this particular order. Many faith communities do these steps simultaneously or in a different order, so begin your journey toward becoming WISE in a way that makes sense for your community.

While the steps may be accomplished in a variety of ways, **fulfilling all the steps ensures that a faith community has engaged in education on mental health challenges** and brain disorders; examined its overt and unconscious feelings of stigma around mental illness; and voted to proclaim itself a community that welcomes publicly, includes, supports, and engages people and their families living with mental health challenges. When a faith community completes these steps, the last of which is taking a congregational vote, it becomes officially certified as a WISE Congregation for Mental Health by the UCC MHN. (Note that while the UCC MHN is grounded in a particular Christian denomination, **any faith community that completes the 10 Steps to Becoming WISE is eligible for national recognition by the UCC as a certified WISE Congregation**).



Begin where you are to
move ahead to where
you want to be.

Step 1:

Consult with your pastor or faith community leaders

Consulting with your lead clergy at the beginning allows them to educate themselves and resolve any concerns they may have early in the WISE process.

Securing the senior pastor's or the congregation leader's support is essential to becoming a WISE Congregation. Leadership support can provide promotion and legitimacy for the WISE process from the pulpit and/or other platforms that will facilitate positive conversations around mental health. Further, clergy offer invaluable advice on the most knowledgeable people to include and the most effective approaches to take to help your congregation move through these WISE steps.

Most clergy have formal pastoral care training to help them support community members in times of crisis, but until recently, issues of mental illness and substance use disorders were not covered in seminaries or comparable educational institutions. So, **while your pastor may have profound pastoral care skills, they may have questions about how becoming WISE may impact your faith community.** Listening respectfully to your faith leaders' concerns and engaging those concerns using the resources in this booklet will empower your clergy member to effectively partner with you as you work through the WISE process together.

Step 2:

Form a WISE Team

Create a culture of compassion and mutual respect within the WISE Team.

After consulting with the pastor, gather a WISE Team of at least three and up to twelve people, depending on the size of your active membership. **You want people who share a passion for welcoming, including, supporting, and engaging concerns about mental health in your faith community.** If your faith community has members open about living with a mental health challenge, at least one should be on your team. A motto is directive: "Nothing about us without us." Together, this team will lead the faith community through the WISE steps.

The work of this WISE Team is sacred: honor this work by beginning and ending meetings with prayer, as a reminder that you are addressing inclusion in a faith context. Help one another notice when subconscious bias arises against people living with mental illness or other brain differences. **To build team cohesion, take time to share meals, or read and discuss a book on mental health together** as you decide how to complete the remaining WISE steps successfully.

"Safety" versus Creating Safe Boundaries in Faith Communities

Media misinformation and societal stigma against those living with mental illness encourage us to equate mental illness with danger. Thus, the first questions some faith leaders and congregation members often raise about becoming WISE relate to keeping the congregation "safe." Research and the lived experience of existing WISE Congregations for Mental Health demonstrate that safety is not an issue: offering radical inclusion to everyone, including those with significant mental health and brain disorder challenges, is a sacred activity, but not a dangerous one.

In any given year in the United States, one person in four is living with mental illness. Our faith communities already include and are led by dedicated people contributing to the greater good while dealing with mental health challenges. Further, studies published by the National Institutes of Health explain that even people with severe mental illnesses are less likely to participate in violence; in fact, they are over 10 times more likely than the general population to be victims of violent crime.

While safety is an important consideration for any faith community, most overt concerns about safely welcoming people with mental health challenges reflect worries that people with significant mental health issues will act in ways that make congregation members uncomfortable. Such apprehensions can be effectively addressed by articulating expectations, or boundaries of behavior that every member and visitor should observe for the well-being of the community.

For an in-depth discussion of safety versus creating safe boundaries within faith communities, check out "Creating Safe Boundaries for Congregations Serving Those with Severe Mental Health Issues," a webinar by the Disciples of Christ's National Benevolence Association at www.nbacares.org/care-resources/webinar-boundaries-mental-illness.

No faith community needs to travel the journey to become WISE alone! The UCC MHN board and current WISE Congregations for Mental Health stand ready to support you with consultation, advice, cheering, and prayers. **When you contact the MHN board, one of its members will be assigned to walk with you through your WISE journey,** acting as a sounding board for ideas, helping you find needed resources, and connecting you to WISE Congregations that have faced similar challenges. You will also be invited to participate in UCC WISE Conferences held at least twice every year across the United States; find out where the UCC MHN booth will be at each UCC General Synod; and learn about webinars or other education opportunities that may serve your WISE Team.

Step 3:

Connect with the UCC Mental Health Network and examine available resources

Step 4:

Decide to help the congregation vote to become a WISE Congregation for Mental Health

There are a variety of ways to create an atmosphere of understanding about mental health challenges and, in the process, overcome stigma:

- **Host educational programs about mental health**, bring in outside speakers, use videos and/or have study groups on relevant books that address this topic, and/or become involved with local National Alliance on Mental Illness programs such as In Our Own Voice and/or Family-to-Family. Mental Health First Aid Training offers a good overview of mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and brain disorders.
- You could also **offer panel presentations with members and their families who live with mental health challenges**. Contact your local mental health center for resources and partner with them in providing programs.
- **Encourage your clergy to use language about mental health/illness in a sermon** or a sermon series and celebrate Mental Health Sunday, observed on the third Sunday of each May, which is designated Mental Health Month. **UCC MHN offers Mental Health Sunday resources, available on www.mhn-ucc.org.**
- Ask your clergy to use a variety of references in the pastoral prayers for support and encouragement of those affected by mental illness, major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or any of the mental challenges many people experience. You can bring up these concerns when the pastor asks for prayer requests.
- Have your governing board commission those who have become members of your congregation's Mental Health Ministry to demonstrate support for your endeavor during a church service.
- **Commission your WISE Team and have its work blessed during a church service** to demonstrate the support of the pastor and the congregation for your endeavor.

Step 5:

Draft your WISE Covenant

Your WISE Covenant for Mental Health fleshes out the concrete actions your congregation will take to become welcoming, inclusive, supportive, and engaged for mental health in your community and context. **You can find samples of WISE Covenants already adopted by congregations around the country on the UCC MHN website at www.mhn-ucc.org**, as well as reports about how several congregations have prepared to become WISE.

Know that there is room for creativity and flexibility in your WISE Covenant. Attitudes about mental health challenges and the resources available for individuals living with mental health challenges or brain disorders varies city by city, county by county, and state by state. These covenants are done with congregation members living with mental health challenges and brain disorders, not for them. **Becoming WISE means actively including members of all abilities and mental health conditions in the full life and leadership of the church.**

Every WISE covenant should be grounded in inclusion

WISE Congregation for Mental Health Example Covenant

In October 2014, First Congregational UCC of Boulder, Colorado, adopted the following WISE Covenant for Mental Health. Every faith community is different so each WISE covenant will be unique, but this first WISE Covenant provides a good starting point for the crafting the covenant your congregation needs.

We, the people of First Congregational Church of Boulder, Colorado, know we are graced by the gifts, stories, and experiences of all our members, including those living with mental health challenges such as, but not limited to, mental illnesses, brain disorders, addictions, and trauma. We know these challenges can profoundly disturb our feelings, thoughts, and behavior. We care about the whole person: body, heart, mind, and soul. We affirm the deep and constant movement of God's Holy Spirit, seeking to bring us to the fullness of life. We believe that all people are beloved by God, and if a person has a mental health challenge, that person has a right to be seen as a person first. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself." He made no distinction between various members of society; he did not show any partiality. He included all people in this commandment.

Sometimes individuals with mental health challenges such as brain disorders, mental illnesses, addictions, and trauma feel cut off from God and do not feel included. It is our calling to communicate to all individuals that God loves all of us equally, even when we do not feel the love of the Holy Spirit in our lives. People with mental health challenges have gifts to be offered in our faith community, and we want everyone to feel fully welcomed, included, supported, and engaged in the life, work, and leadership of our church.

We, the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, of Boulder, Colorado, vote to continue to be a welcoming, inclusive, supportive and engaged (WISE) congregation for mental health.

Call to action:

We pledge to create a welcoming environment for people with mental health challenges and their families:

- We pledge to educate ourselves and offer educational opportunities to help our whole congregation understand the issues surrounding the mental health challenges such as mental illnesses/brain disorders, addictions and trauma and the implications of this covenant.

- In an effort to reduce social stigma, we pledge to examine our own attitudes and preconceived notions about mental health challenges and mental health and to confront our own ingrained stigma.
- We pledge to actively welcome those with mental health challenges into our faith community and provide a safe environment in which people can tell their stories and share their journeys.

We pledge to include people with mental health challenges in the life, work, and leadership of the congregation:

- We commit to recruiting, nominating, and supporting persons with mental health challenges to serve on teams and in leadership positions within the congregation.
- When calling clergy and other staff, we pledge to be open to hiring persons with mental health challenges.
- We pledge to support people in our congregation who have mental health challenges and their families:
- We pledge to reach out to those suffering from brain disorders/mental illnesses, addictions, and trauma in the same way we reach out to those living with other physical illnesses.
- We pledge to offer companionship and compassion for individuals and families living with mental health challenges.

We pledge to engage with other organizations that work at the intersection of mental health and faith/spirituality/religion:

- We pledge to welcome and encourage outside groups who deal with mental health challenges, brain disorders/mental illnesses, addictions, and trauma to use our church facilities.
- We pledge to engage with other organizations to find opportunities to be in shared mission, ministry, and advocacy together. This includes working with our church's Mental Health Ministry team, the UCC Mental Health Network and the UCC Disabilities Ministry.

This vote affirms that we join in the process of always becoming more welcoming, inclusive, supportive, and engaged with all of God's people.

Step 6:

Involve leadership in creating the WISE Covenant

Ask the boards and committees, or whoever comprises your congregation's leadership teams, if a few members of your team can attend a meeting to present a draft of the covenant. Make sure that everyone in the group has seen a copy of the covenant before you arrive. This is an opportunity for you to briefly present why you are personally involved in this issue and why you believe this is something your congregation needs to be addressing/acting upon. Then give ample time for people to respond with questions, concerns, additions, or simply to declare their affirmation. Take notes and thank them for their time and interest. This process may take many months. **It is important that people have the opportunity to talk about the covenant thoroughly before a congregational vote.** We encourage you to have some open forums or adult sessions where everyone in the church is invited to engage in conversation about the covenant. It is best not to rush this process.

When your team and faith leaders are confident there has been sufficient time to talk about the covenant and any concerns have been addressed, you can talk with the church leadership about when the best time would be for the congregation to take a vote.

The vote enables your congregation to "own" your WISE covenant. The procedure will differ from faith community to faith community. For example, it could be part of the annual meeting of the congregation. Again, copies of the covenant that will be presented should be available for everyone to read before the meeting.

The UCC Mental Health Network will certify your church as a WISE Congregation for mental health when we receive a copy of your adopted WISE Covenant and a summary of the process your church followed to become WISE. **Once your WISE Covenant is certified by the UCC MHN board of directors, your church will be officially listed as WISE on the UCC MHN and national UCC website, and you will receive a signed certificate.**

You may submit the information and a copy of your adopted WISE Covenant in the text of an email to mhnucc@gmail.com. Take time to celebrate your success and affirm your covenant at a regular worship service with a prayer or litany of affirmation/celebration. The public proclamation of your WISE Covenant will demonstrate to people who live with mental health challenges that your faith community can be a safe spiritual home for them and their families. Remember, this covenant affirms your relationship with God who has come in Jesus to show us the way to justice making, peacekeeping, and compassionate care.

Step 7: Vote

Step 8: Certify and celebrate becoming WISE

This covenant indicates how you will continue to relate with each other as a sign of God's presence.

Step 9: Publicize

Share your WISE Congregation commitment via local media, your association, your conference, or the appropriate denominational organization. You are now community leaders who can offer a welcoming place for often-marginalized members of the community. One of the easiest ways to proclaim your leadership as a WISE Congregation is through drafting and emailing a press release to local newspapers, radio stations, and TV stations. **For information on how to write and promote a simple press release, check out: www.yourchurchinthenews.org/writing-a-press-release.html.**

You can also share your commitment to serving and including people with mental health and brain disorders by sending a letter or a copy of your press release to your local mental health and substance use disorder organizations, and brain disorder organizations such as your local Brain Injury Association of America chapter. **Mental health providers and local hospital spiritual-care departments will also want to know about your commitment to offering a safe and inclusive community for those living with a mental health challenge.**

Your congregation will provide a priceless resource and beacon of hope for your entire area!

Step 10: Turn to the future

As you live into your WISE covenant, new opportunities for mission and ministry will emerge. To keep your mental health ministry growing, form a standing WISE team or committee to explore ways your congregation can transform and expand over time. And share your successes and your lessons learned with other faith communities and with UCC MHN. **Your experiences will inspire the next faith community walking the steps to become a WISE Congregation for Mental Health.**

Living Into Your WISE Covenant/Commitment

Faith communities can practice being a Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged Congregation for Mental Health in the following ways:

1. Welcome: Create a welcoming environment for people with mental health challenges and their families:

- Welcome people by name.
- Create “Mental Health Ministry” badges, visually indicating that mental health is important in our congregation
- Launch a Sunday Companionship Team.
- Start a Mental Health Ministry Team to understand mental health challenges and address stigma around them in the larger community.

2. Inclusion: Include people with mental health challenges and brain differences in the life of the congregation and ensure worship is a safe space to speak on mental health issues:

- Actively include people with mental health challenges in the work of the Mental Health Ministry.
- Use inclusive language from the pulpit about mental health conditions such as major depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, PTSD, eating disorders, and substance use disorders.
- Offer prayers for those living with mental health challenges, specifically praying with and for those who are willing to have their mental illnesses acknowledged in prayer.
- Celebrate Mental Health Sunday (designated by the United Church of Christ as the third Sunday in May every year).
- Find or develop a curriculum and/or adult forums that ensure the needs of adults and children with mental health challenges are included in all areas of church life.
- Provide education and activities that welcome any marginalized group, including immigrants, communities of color, members of the LGBTQIAA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and allies) community, to share and be honored for their experiences and stories regarding access to mental health resources and living with mental health challenges.





3. Support: Provide support for people with mental health challenges and their families:

- Offer a Spiritual Support Group for Mental Health each month in which individuals living with mental health challenges, their families, and their friends can share their stories in a faith-based safe space.
- Develop a community mental health resource list that can be shared and used by church staff and volunteers.
- Offer rides to church or to local support groups.
- Provide the proverbial “casserole” to those who are experiencing mental health challenges at home or in mental health center/hospital.
- Consider practical support such as respite care for caregivers, temporary housing, and offering opportunities for meaningful work for individuals living with a mental health challenge.

4. Engagement: Provide outreach and educational opportunities both within the congregation and throughout the larger community:

- Offer a Mental Health Ministry Forum that can offer speakers, a book study, discussions, sermon reviews, or other education each month or every other month.
- Provide mental health promotion and support training to the congregation and larger community. For example, offer a free or low-cost Mental Health First Aid certification training at your faith community.
- Link with other faith communities and faith organizations like the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network, doing mental health ministry.
- Connect with community partners, including other local churches, NAMI, local mental health clinics, and other non-profit organizations.
- Call attention to current local, state, or national legislation regarding mental health and access to mental health services by offering education and advocacy opportunities.
- Allow outside groups that deal with mental health concerns to use your facility without cost. For example, allow your local NAMI chapter to host a weekly NAMI support group in your faith community.
- Sign up for the UCC Mental Health Weekly blogs at www.mhn-ucc.org and join the UCC Mental Health Network Facebook page.
- Consider making a financial donation to the work of the UCC Mental Health Network.

Mental health services are typically managed and provided within city or county systems that are funded by state and federal government funds. Although the organization of each mental health system is unique, there are organizations and agencies you can contact in your area to learn how mental health services are provided in your community. The following are good places to begin your research to understand your local mental health system better.

- The National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI), the nation’s largest grassroots advocacy and education non-profit, has state and local affiliates. Find your closest affiliate at www.nami.org.
- Mental Health America is a nationwide advocacy non-profit focused on advocating for the well-being of individuals and families with mental health challenges. To find your local chapter, go to <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net>.
- Counties often provide mental health programs for adults and children through a system of clinics and providers. These systems utilize Medicaid funding to provide low and no-cost mental health services. Check with your county to find out more.
- Your child’s school can be a resource for learning what is available to those in need of low-cost mental health services, including individuals needing help with substance use issues. Children sometimes have access to mental health services through their school district, so a public school’s Special Education department can often provide information.
- Your state or local Alzheimer’s Association office can provide resources about services for older adults and their families dealing with dementia or mental health challenges.

Resources

General Mental Health Resources

- Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) – www.adaa.org
- Caring Clergy Project – www.inmi.us/for-clergy
- Interfaith Network for Mental Health – www.inmi.us
- Mental Health America – www.mentalhealthamerica.net
- Mental Health First Aid – www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org
- Mental Health Ministries – www.mentalhealthministries.net
- National Alliance on Mental Illness – www.nami.org
- National Eating Disorders (NEDA) - 1-800-931--2237
- National Suicide Lifeline - 1-800273-TALK (8255)
Veterans Lifeline - Option "1"
- National Institute on Mental Health – www.nimh.nih.gov
- Pathways to Promise – www.pathways2promise.org
- Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – www.samhsa.gov
- United Church of Christ Mental Health Network – www.mhn-ucc.com

Trauma Resources

- Coping with Disasters and Traumatic Events (SAMSHA) – www.samhsa.gov
- NAMI information on PTSD – www.nami.org
- PTSD and Your Family - information on signs and symptoms in children and teens – www.webmd.com
- PTSD and Trauma Help Guide from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs - www.ptsd.va.gov
- Sidran Institute for Traumatic Stress Education & Advocacy – www.sidran.org
- Wounds of War: The Church as a Healing Community—download this resource packet from the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns –www.presbyterianmission.org

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry – www.aacap.org
- Autism in the Congregation: Offering Jesus' Welcome to All Children – www.adnetonline.org/Blog/Pages/Autism-in-the-Congregation.aspx
- Balanced Mind Foundation – www.dbsalliance.org
- Challenging Kids – www.challengingkids.com
- Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder – www.chadd.org
- The Child Anxiety Network – www.childanxiety.net
- Children's Mental Health Facts: Helping Children and Youth with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder – <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA16-5012/SMA16-5012.pdf>
- Child Mind Institute – www.childmind.org
- Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health – www.ffcmh.org
- International OCD Foundation "OCD in Kids" - kids.iocdf.org/
- Kids in the House –resources for parents on mental health – www.kidsinthehouse.com/experts/mental-health
- Worry Wise Kids – www.worrywisekids.org

- Alzheimer's Association: Phone: 1-800-272-3900 - www.alz.org
- Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center: Phone: 1-800-438-4380 – <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers>
- Booklet: Caring for a Person with Alzheimer's Disease from the National Institute on Aging – <https://order.nia.nih.gov/publication/caring-for-a-person-with-alzheimers-disease-your-easy-to-use-guide>
- For people caring for someone with dementia – www.alzheimers.gov
- National Family Caregivers Association – www.caregiveraction.org
- Resources on dementia and spirituality: "Spirituality and Dementia" – www.alz.org/library/downloads/spirituality_rl2011.pdf

Youth Mental Health Resources

Dementia Resources