

U.C.C. WELLNESS MINISTRIES TOOLKIT Section 3

EXEMPLARS OF WELLNESS MINISTRIES ACTIVITIES

Mental Health and Wellness

Title: *Becoming a W.I.S.E Congregation for Mental Health*

Age groups served: Youth and Adults

Reason for development and implementation:

Historically, people experiencing mental illness have been stigmatized, and those experiencing mental health challenges have been excluded, even from churches. Yet, in any given year in the United States, one person in four is living with mental illness. Mental Health Ministries developed in local churches affirm the importance of mental health in individuals, families, and communities and offer education and ongoing support to members experiencing mental health challenges.

The [UCC Mental Health Network](#) works to reduce stigma and promote the inclusion of people with mental illnesses/brain disorders and their families in the life, leadership, and work of congregations. In 2015, at General Synod 30, the resolution *Developing Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged (WISE) Congregations for Mental Health* was adopted. The UCC Mental Health Network then developed [Becoming a WISE Congregation Toolkit](#) to assist congregations in becoming more welcoming, inclusive, and supportive of those living with mental health challenges, and to engage within their community advocates for mental health services for everyone.

Sharing the story: Developing a Mental Health Ministry and becoming WISE

First Congregational Church of Berkeley, UCC, developed a Mental Health Ministry first and then three years later voted to become a WISE Congregation for Mental Health. The process is detailed in [The Basics: How one church started and grew a Mental Health Ministry ... and voted to become a WISE Congregation for Mental Health](#). The document covers 17 topics, including how to get started and gain support from church leaders, developing a Mental Health Leadership Team, programming ideas that support individuals and groups, Mental Health Sunday and other ideas for worship, and the process of becoming a recognized UCC WISE Congregation for Mental Health.

As the Mental Health Ministry developed, some concerns were expressed that needed to be addressed.

- For example, some people expressed reluctance to attend an event with the words "mental health" in the invitation. Efforts to make events feel comfortable for everyone included: specific, focused agendas, reading a statement explaining confidentiality at the beginning of each gathering, and specifying the stated purpose

of education and general sharing. As a result, the hesitation diminished, and attendance increased.

- Others were concerned that the topics would be too personal. So educational gatherings covered a wide umbrella of topics, the majority led by church members. These included such diverse topics as emotional support animals, sharing hobbies to cope with pandemic isolation and stress, discussing sermons given about mental health, and practicing art therapy.
- The role of the Mental Health Ministry members was clearly stated so that it was understood that they were **not** mental health professionals. Instead, they were church members interested in mental health who wanted to bring their interest openly to their church community. The Mental Health Ministry maintained a list of community mental health resources for referrals as needed.
- The Mental Health Ministry listened for suggestions from church members and enlisted their participation. As Mental Health activities and programs developed, individuals made suggestions and offered new ideas. This process provided an opportunity to enlist them in developing and presenting a new topic. In addition, the Ministry discovered "hidden church leaders" who took a step forward with acknowledgment of their new idea and encouraged their participation and leadership.
- The phrase "mental health" made some people feel uncomfortable. So in the church welcome and newsletter, the ministers frequently mentioned mental health, which helped the words "mental health" become normalized in the congregation.

Evaluation:

- Some new church members have shared that they joined this church because of its emphasis on mental health and the inclusion of people experiencing mental illness.
- Mental Health Ministry has continuously invited church members into leadership roles and active participation, paving the way for their continued engagement and involvement. Because of this, new leaders continue to develop the program with their vision, continuing with current activities and bringing fresh ideas.

Next steps:

- New leadership is continuing to adapt the Ministry, building on the program's first years while looking forward to the future.
- The church continues to proclaim itself as a WISE Congregation for Mental Health in publicity, worship, print materials, and most importantly, acting out the WISE Covenant within their church community.

Resources used:

All mentioned items and resources are available at [UCC Mental Health Network](#).