

Ten Steps to Become a WISE Congregation for Mental Health

Every congregation is unique, so you may want to follow these steps in a different order.

Step 1: Consult with your pastor

Meet with your pastor and enlist her or his support for your vision of becoming a WISE congregation. Share the reasons you feel called to make this happen. Discuss the pastor's role in the process and ask for guidance. Keeping the pastor informed is important whether or not the pastor attends any of the meetings.

Step 2: Form a WISE Team

Gather an ad hoc planning group of at least 3 to 8 (or even more!) people who share your passion for the full welcome, inclusion, and support with and engagement in the issues among people who live with mental health challenges and their families in the life of your congregation. If your congregation has members who are open about living with a mental health challenge, at least one should be on the team. Begin and end meetings with prayer as a reminder that you are addressing these concerns in a faithful way/ in a faith context.

Step 3: Connect with the UCC Mental Health Network, and examine available resources

The UCC Mental Health Network maintains a nationwide network of WISE consultants trained to help congregations through their journey towards a WISE covenant. Contact us at mhnucc@gmail.com. We'll answer your questions, and send you a WISE Starter Kit. Explore the MHN website to identify websites, books, films, and other resources that may be helpful as your core team begins work.

Step 4: Develop an approach that leads to the congregation's vote to become a WISE Congregation for Mental Health.

There are a variety of ways that you can create an atmosphere of understanding about mental health challenges and in the process, overcome stigma. First, your approach could include educational programs about mental health, as in bringing in outside speakers, or using videos, or being involved with local NAMI programs such as In Our Own Voice or Family to Family. You could also offer panel presentations, especially with members who live with mental health challenges and their families. Second, you could encourage your clergy to use language about mental health/illness in a sermon or a sermon series. You could also ask the clergy to use a variety of references in the pastoral prayers for support and encouragement for those who are affected by mental illness, by major depression, by schizophrenia, by bipolar disorder, or any of the challenges which many people experience. Or, you can bring up these concerns when the pastor asks for prayer requests.

Step 5: Draft your WISE covenant

A written covenant is essential in affirming that your congregation is a WISE Congregation. This is a confirmation of your congregation's commitment in becoming WISE, and is also the statement that will be sent to the national UCC Mental Health Network for official WISE certification. You'll find examples of WISE covenants on the UCC MHN website.

Step 6: Involve your church's leadership in engaging in 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 the 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 present, briefly, why you are personally involved in this issue and why you think this is something your congregation needs to be addressing/acting on. Then give ample time for people to respond with questions, concerns, additions, or simply to hear their affirmation. Take notes and thank them for their time and interest. This process may take several months. It is important that people have the opportunity to talk about it 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.

Step 7: Vote

When your team and the clergy are confident that 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 church to church. For example, it could be part of the annual meeting of the church. Again, copies of the covenant that will be presented should be available for everyone to read before the meeting.

Step 8: *Certify and celebrate being WISE*

The UCC Mental Health Network will certify a church as WISE when we receive a written statement from the church. The UCC MHN’s WISE program is responsible for the certification of new WISE covenants. Certification means that your church will be officially listed as WISE on the UCC MHN and national UCC website. Certification also entitles you to a wide range of resources designed to help WISE congregations grow as well as those resources that continue to be developed. You may submit the information in the text of an email to mhnucc@gmail.com. Affirm your covenant at a regular service on Sunday morning. A covenant will indicate to people who live with mental health challenges that your church may be a safe spiritual home for them and their families. Remember, this covenant affirms your relationship with God and indicates how you will continue to relate with each other as a sign of God’s presence. Therefore, your celebration ought to be framed by prayer and worship.

Step 9: *Publicize*

If you don’t publicize your WISE covenant widely, your community won’t know that you’re a Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged congregation for mental health. And publicity won’t be a one-time effort: look for any opportunity to reach the wider mental health community and other seekers who are looking for a church with WISE values. Social media could also be an effective, affordable, and influential means of promoting your church's mental health ministry.

Step 10: *Turn to the future*

As you live into your WISE covenant, your congregation will open up to new opportunities for mission and ministry. To keep the momentum going, form a standing WISE committee to explore ways your covenant can continue to have an impact.