

Moving Toward Declaring Wisconsin Conference UCC a WISE Conference for Mental Health

The Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ Board of Directors brings forth a resolution to declare the Wisconsin Conference a WISE Conference for Mental Health.

This resolution is supported by the Wisconsin Conference WISE Team.

This process for adopting resolutions calls for a vote of the annual meeting when first brought forth, followed by one year of study and engagement by local congregations, and a confirming vote at the next year's annual meeting.

The action at the business meeting this year will determine whether we begin this process.

The resolution process calls for at least 30% of the congregations to report that they have engaged in some study. This study can be in the manner chosen by the local church. This local study only calls for some discussion; it does not require that any action be taken or decision voted on. Responses are expected by March 1, 2023.

A vote to formally adopt the resolution would be held at the Annual Meeting in June 2023.

The WISE Team is available to provide support during the year of study and to be a resource to any local congregation, any committee, any Association body, any clergy group or any other gathering that will be holding discussions. To reach the team, email Lisa Hart (lhart@wcucc.org), associate conference minister for faith formation and justice ministries.

A Resolution Declaring the Wisconsin Conference a WISE Conference for Mental Health

Presented to the 2022 Annual Meeting by the Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ and the WCUCC WISE Team.

Summary

God's call to wholeness includes our physical and mental health. Every human has a brain and a body. Physical and mental health are, therefore, a reality of life for every person. Normalizing the importance of taking care of our physical AND mental health will help destigmatize neurodiversity (embracing the differences in brain function and behavioral traits, understanding diversity is a natural element of the human population), and challenges to our mental health (including, but not limited to, depression, anxiety, substance-related and addictive disorders) and the stigma and attitudes directed at those suffering these challenges. Creating a more welcoming community where people feel safe to address these issues will encourage those struggling to seek out needed treatment or access community support for their mental health.

While dominant media narratives and socio-political discourse would depict individuals with mental illnesses as dangerous threats to public or personal safety, in reality, statistics indicate those with a mental illness are up to ten times more likely to be the victims of violence than the perpetrators of that violence. This social stigma and resulting community isolation contribute to:

- lower rates of employment
- higher rates of homelessness and incarceration
- social policies leading to the lack of adequate and affordable mental health services

Too often, this stigma extends into the church, one place where every child of God should find support and be nurtured in their spiritual, mental, emotional and physical needs. All persons who enter our doors should feel safe and welcomed in the totality of their being. Yet, in ways both interpersonal and systemic, Christians have participated in the stigmatization and exclusion of individuals experiencing mental health challenges.

In recent years, the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network has made a concerted effort to support local churches in addressing mental health stigma through its Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged (WISE) initiative. The objective of WISE is to encourage UCC congregations to become more welcoming of those with

mental health challenges, to expand church and community inclusion of those who are living with mental health challenges, to be supportive of all who are affected by mental health challenges, and to engage in ways to live out a commitment to be WISE about mental health.

It is in this spirit of unconditional love and radical welcome this resolution is offered.

Biblical, Theological and Historical Grounding

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30, NRSV)

From the early historic roots of the United Church of Christ and carrying through to our present-day church bodies, it is part of our denominational identity and theology to contemplate and practice our love of God by loving our neighbors and ourselves, in body, heart, soul, and mind, in practical and life-giving ways.

We proclaim as central to the faith life of our conference this commandment Jesus offers in the Gospel according to Mark. In practice, this commandment calls the Wisconsin Conference UCC (WCUCC) to understand challenges to mental wellness as a natural part of the human experience and, through our education, programming missions and ministries, to honor the inherent wholeness of all individuals, recognizing that mental health is part of being embodied souls.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35, NRSV)

The church united in Christ is called to be a community which breaks through fear and isolation offering love, hope, care and healing through providing compassion, community, and support. In the ways the church has hurt one another by its use of holy scripture to discriminate against mental illness, used prayer as a weapon against those seeking treatment for mental dis-ease, and ‘demon-ized’ those experiencing mental health challenges, we own the trauma and violence we have caused.

We proclaim as central to the faith life of our conference this commandment Jesus offers in the Gospel according to John. In practice, this commandment calls the WCUCC to walk alongside local ministries and members engaged in efforts to reduce stigma and enhance inclusion in their communities, provide communities of support and education for those with mental health challenges and offer tangible support through

local and conference-wide efforts.

In adopting this resolution we join the wider United Church of Christ, who in 1995, passed a resolution proclaiming justice for those with serious mental illness; who in 2015, passed a resolution encouraging congregations to become WISE; and in 2019, voted to recognize those with mental health challenges as an historically under-represented group. With these historical foundations and the work begun by the Mental Health Network of the United Church of Christ, the WCUCC will stand, historically, in a line of justice advocacy around mental health.

The Text of the Resolution

WHEREAS, all people have bodies and brains and therefore have physical and mental health; and

WHEREAS, God calls all people to wholeness, which occurs through physical, spiritual, emotional and mental health, and with this understanding, God calls all people to recognize the diversity of issues related to mental health as being a natural element of the human existence; and

WHEREAS, 1 in 4 people experience some form of mental health challenge; and

WHEREAS, continued stigma, discrimination, pain, and silence occurs in society and within our churches against individuals with mental health challenges; and

WHEREAS, Wisconsin has a suicide rate of 14.5 per 100,000, above the national average of 13.5, according to 2020 data from the Centers for Disease Control; and

WHEREAS, Wisconsin consistently ranked poorly on access to mental health care, as well as, overall mental health outcomes in annual reports published by Mental Health America; and

WHEREAS, marginalized populations, particularly persons in jails/prisons, persons experiencing homelessness, persons lacking health insurance coverage, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, experience systemic barriers to adequate mental health services; and

WHEREAS, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ has on three separate occasions adopted resolutions supporting the increased inclusion of individuals with mental health challenges in the fullness of the life of the church; and

WHEREAS, the Florida, Northern California Nevada, and Indiana-Kentucky Conferences have adopted WISE covenants at the Conference level; and

WHEREAS, the Wisconsin Conference recognizes the need for increased inclusion of those with mental health challenges and their communities of support in the full life of the Conference; and

WHEREAS, we recognize the communities of support for people with mental health challenges often do not have their own emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical needs met in local ministry settings; and

WHEREAS, we recognize the need to support the well-being and mental health of all, including our authorized ministers;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, we the Wisconsin Conference (WCUCC) of the United Church of Christ, being committed to the work of justice and inclusion for all people as image-bearers of the divine, designate ourselves as a WISE Conference for Mental Health (in the community and the wider world).

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the WCUCC convene a WISE Team to develop a strategic plan for implementing WISE at the conference level, including consideration of possible education and training needs, financial support, personnel, and opportunities for collaboration with existing community resources.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the WCUCC through the WISE Team, the Conference Staff and the Board of Directors, identify and pursue opportunities to be in shared mission, ministry, fellowship and advocacy with other faith and community organizations, including, but not limited to, the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network, the United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries, and the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, we encourage associations and local ministry settings to develop and adopt covenants to be WISE for Mental Health, and to work to understand the needs and experiences of those living with mental health challenges and their communities of support within their local and regional settings.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, we encourage local ministry settings to work to eradicate stigma around mental health challenges and neurodiversity, and to offer support to all persons affected by mental health challenges, including advocating for access to adequate treatment options for all persons but especially for persons in jails/prisons, persons experiencing homelessness, persons lacking health insurance coverage and BIPOC communities.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, we encourage associations, local church ministry settings and related organizations to offer support to the family and friends of those who struggle with mental health challenges.

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, we encourage congregations to offer regular feedback to the WCUCC WISE Team as it works to implement WISE in the conference setting.

FUNDING

The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the Board of Directors as funds are available.

IMPLEMENTATION

The WISE Team in consultation with the Conference Staff and Board of Directors will design a strategic plan outlining Conference priorities and new opportunities for mission and ministry to be presented to the Board of Directors of the WCUCC prior to the 2024 Annual Meeting.

Presented to the Board of Directors of the Wisconsin Conference by the WISE Team for consideration at the 2022 Annual Meeting as a Resolution of Witness.

WISE Team Members:

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