



HEARTLAND CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
N. KY • OH • WV

“The Thing Beneath the Thing”



Dear Friends in Christ,

As I study the life of Jesus, I continue to be amazed at his ability to perceive the thing beneath the thing. Sometimes that “thing” expressed itself as a longing for physical healing. At other times it was the restoration of a relationship long broken. Often, he was able to perceive things untold but understood by opening his loving heart to the other, drawing out possibilities for new life where no new thing seemed possible.

It has been said that everyone is carrying something that is not immediately seen. It may be a hidden grief, an unresolved hurt, a broken dream, an illness too close and painful to name out loud. Experiences with mental illness are also often hidden and unnamed – the thing beneath the thing. The month of May has been designated Mental Health Awareness month. This coming Sunday, May 15th has been designated Mental Health Sunday in the life of the United Church of Christ. Truthfully, every Sunday is mental health Sunday because the unseen is perpetually with us, especially when it comes to mental illness and our yearning for greater health.

I would venture a guess that every one of our communities of faith and every individual who is part of those communities has been touched by the reality of mental illness and the call to love that it presents. In my own extended family bi-polar disorder came to live and will never go away. Often, mental illness has been hidden for fear of what others will think or because of the unpredictability which brain illnesses present. Because of this, often the silent pain one carries deepens, only tightening the grip of the unseen “thing” holding life hostage.

Because we live life inside family systems of many descriptions, it is not simply the person carrying a particular illness who is affected. Everyone whose life is touched by that family member is also carrying a “thing” often unspoken, hidden, exhausted, and hurting. I am guessing that you may know what I am talking about. This may seem obvious, yet I hope by naming this truth out loud we may begin in some way to unbury the “thing” that is beneath the thing.

Especially given the roller coaster which COVID has cultivated over the past two years, there is an even greater need for safe spaces of support, transparency, trust, and loving presence when it comes to mental health. It is here that church communities seeking to follow the way of Jesus have a special call to pay attention and tend the “thing” of mental illness that often goes untended.

But where to begin? One place to begin would be to lift up in our shared prayers the reality of this often-hidden thing. To do so, is to begin normalizing the conversation about mental health alongside every other healthcare concern we may carry. **A very important next step could be to consider what it might look like to become a WISE congregation.** In the UCC, A WISE congregation joins the mission of being Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged in the mental health of the community and the wider world.

You are not alone. This work of love requires support. **For this reason, a Heartland Conference Inclusion Network** has been formed and is growing. The group meets via zoom and **its next meeting will be on Tuesday, June 7th at 7:30 pm.** The group seeks to connect, equip, and support congregations and individuals in call to be WISE. The Inclusion Network is also exploring how to support congregations around issues of accessibility. For more information **contact Rev. Teri Lynn Stackhouse at tstackhouse01@gmail.com.** In addition, there is an amazing array of resources developed by the UCC Mental Health Network which can be found at www.mhn-ucc.org. We are gifted to have the remarkable leadership of Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund, UCC Minister for Disabilities and Mental Health Justice, shepherding this work in our life together.

In this Easter season where we celebrate God's power to bring new life out of the depths of everything, I hope you will consider what a life-giving mental health ministry might look like in your congregation. What a gift it could be not only to those in your congregation but also to the wider community of which you are a part. May God gift us with the courage and love of Jesus Christ to unbury the thing of mental illness so that joy may have more space to rise. Blessings on you all!

-Pastor Dave