

Framework for WISE Small Group Conversations

[July, 2021]

Introduction

Welcoming-Inclusive-Supportive-Engaged [WISE]

As most of you know, we have had our own mental health ministry for many years and had good success. But then we found out about the UCC Mental Health Network and their WISE program. The Network developed a process for congregations so they could become WISE about mental health and addictions. WISE means being welcoming, inclusive, supportive and engaged with persons experiencing mental illness and their families.. Churches developed covenants to ground their work and took advantage of conferences and training programs. We began exploring what becoming “WISE” could mean for us. We believe it will enhance our ministry and provide us with a focus and assist with any resources we may need. We have been able to learn from other churches and study their programs and resource materials.

So, we want to have our church adopt a covenant and join the growing number of churches who have the WISE designation. This document we’ve shared is a draft. At this time, we are seeking feedback from all of you as you examine the proposed commitments and decide how you can join this cause of supporting all of us and our families in living into a WISE covenant.

Why a “Covenant”

To enter into a WISE covenant runs deeper than making a simple promise to be Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged with persons who experience brain disease and their families. Entering into a WISE covenant is a *holy* and *sacred* promise to God, to each other, and to our community. It is grounded in the perfect love we know God holds for each of us. We are His beloved children, and through a WISE covenant we proclaim that we are beloved even when we experience mental illness, addiction, or other brain dis-ease. As Pastor Amy proclaims in Sunday services, “We are not perfect; we are perfectly loved by God.” This is the heart of the WISE Covenant.

DRAFT
W.I.S.E. Covenant
Kent United Church of Christ

“Enlivened by the grace of Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Kent United Church of Christ does justice, embraces faithful love, and walks humbly with our God to serve and transform lives, our community and the world.” (*Micah 6:8*)

Emerging from this congregational mission and inspired by Jesus’ acts of compassion, healing and radical love, we formed our WISE team to plan and implement opportunities for the whole congregation to engage in the WISE process. We centered this engagement on spiritual healing and wellness as a critical element of mental illness and addiction recovery. Kent UCC has had a mental health ministry since 2007, led by Mary Homer, our beloved member who is in recovery from mental illness. This ministry has included social engagement with local group home residents, financial support of local mental health partner organizations, book studies, poetry readings, NAMI walks, community conversations and worship services.

Our congregation has been touched deeply by the pain of mental illness and addiction, including members currently incarcerated due to the criminalization of mental health and addiction and families who have lost loved ones because of mental illness and addiction. We have also been touched by the gifts of those in recovery, granting us the courage to proclaim an openness to collective healing, recognizing we are *all* in need of it. Mental health is a part of all our lives; this is not an “us” vs. “them” reality. Further, we recognize that our role is not to “fix” the situation, but to make referrals and share resources when appropriate, and to be present with those experiencing it. We are called to proclaim that we are loved by our Almighty and All-Vulnerable God and accepted for exactly who we are, no exceptions. We do not believe that our identity is rooted in any diagnosis, addiction, or mental health challenge but rather as the beloved children of God.

Therefore, we the people of the United Church of Christ of Kent, Ohio vow to enter into covenant with God and one another to be a Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged (W.I.S.E.) congregation for those living with mental health challenges and their families.

We commit to being a church of extravagant hospitality and radical belonging, accepting each other just as we are and honoring our lived experiences.

We commit to being present by holding sacred space and accompanying one another, and our families, through experiences of the pain and despair and of mental illness, addiction, or other brain dis-ease.

We commit to being a stigma-free community. We pledge to become judgment-free and shame-free, choosing words that are life-giving and not stigmatizing labels, affirming our humanity instead of creating more boundaries between us.

We commit to educating ourselves and our wider community to better understand mental health and substance use disorders, neurodevelopmental differences, and other brain disease.

We commit to companioning our children, youth and our elderly, listening without judgment to their stories of mental dis-ease, whether personal or within their families and among their friends. Mental health is a part of our overall health at all ages and stages of life, and we recognize the particular needs in certain seasons of our lives.

We commit to recruit, nominate, and support persons in mental health and addiction recovery to serve on ministry teams and in leadership positions within the congregation.

We commit to an openness to calling clergy and hiring staff engaged in recovery from mental health, addiction, or brain dis-ease challenges.

We commit to maintain contact and offer our support to members who become incarcerated because of episodes of mental illness and behaviors due to addiction.

We commit to forming strategic partnerships with mental health and addiction recovery agencies and professionals, the LGBTQAI+ community, racial justice organizations and social service agencies to join with them in advocacy for justice.

We commit to invite and encourage support and recovery organizations to use our building facilities.

We commit to maintaining clear and healthy boundaries as a congregation. Our role is to share the love of God, but it is not within our power to fix or cure, or to act as if we are something other than a faith community.

We commit to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ for all who are a part of our community so that everyone knows they are loved and accepted by God just as they are, and to provide the hope that Christ makes all things new.