

Twelve 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, or add other steps.

Step 1: Consult with your pastor

Meet with your pastor and enlist his or her support for your vision of becoming a WISE congregation. Share the reasons why you feel called to make this happen. Discuss the pastor's role in the process and ask for guidance.

Step 2: Form a core team

Gather an ad hoc planning group of three to five people who share your passion for the full welcome, inclusion, support and engagement with people who live with mental health challenges and their families in the life of your congregation. Invite your pastor to attend the team's meetings. If your congregation has members who are open about living with a mental health challenge, at least one should be represented on the team. Begin and end meetings with prayer.

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: Gather information about your congregation and create a plan

No WISE process should begin without some

reflection on the unique culture of your congregation, your "way of doing things." Assess the congregation and surrounding local community. Ask these questions: What is the mental health challenge most commonly faced? What mental health programs already exist locally? How does the congregation handle change? How can difficult topics be explored in an environment of mutual respect? How can the WISE process be a "safe space" for every member of the congregation? What should be the pastor's role? What are the potential obstacles? Use this information to guide your group's decisions as you create a detailed plan to become a WISE congregation.

Step 5: Make it 'official'

Until now, your core team has been an unofficial, ad hoc body. After developing your plan, you should be ready to form an expanded, official committee of the congregation—sometimes called a "WISE Task Force." Ask the church's leadership teams to approve and bless your task force and your plan. Task force membership will include the original core team and other "stakeholders" in the congregation. The transition to an official task force helps the congregation understand that the WISE process is not the project of a special-interest group but is sanctioned by the church's lay and ordained leadership.

Step 6: Provide educational opportunities

Your congregational assessment from step 4 will help you make decisions about opportunities for education and dialogue (panels, films, Bible studies) that meet the needs of your members. Panels—especially with members who live with mental health challenges and their families —

are an important way to humanize the conversation. Films—both documentaries and dramas about living with mental illness—can connect with some of your members in ways that written resources can't. Bible studies can help members understand the basic values of Scripture, which will inform your WISE covenant. You will also want to decide the order in which topics are introduced. You might begin by exploring foundational questions like the biblical values of hospitality and welcome.

Step 7: Draft your WISE covenant

A written covenant puts your congregation on record that it is truly in the process of becoming a WISE congregation. The UCC Mental Health Network will not certify a church as WISE without a written statement. A covenant will show people who live with mental health challenges that your church strives to be a safe spiritual home for them and their families. Use language that is authentic and reflects your congregation's values. You'll find examples of WISE covenants on the UCC MHN website.

Step 8: Conduct an exploratory survey before you vote

While you may be tempted to skip this step, it is a vital one. One of the goals of the WISE journey is to help a congregation experience the fullness of the Body of Christ, not to divide us against one another. If you take a vote, and the result shows the congregation is still conflicted, the process will have failed even if the vote passes. To avoid an outcome in which the church is divided into “winners” and “losers,” an exploratory survey will help. Have you heard from every constituency? Have you effectively addressed all concerns and fears? Take a congregational survey or “straw poll” (which should protect the anonymity of respondents). If the result shows that less than 75 percent would vote in favor of the proposed WISE covenant, the task force should meet with the pastor and discuss additional steps that may be needed to reach a near consensus. But if your survey shows that more than 75 percent will support the covenant, you may be ready for a vote.

Step 9: Vote

The vote enables your congregation to “own” your WISE covenant. The procedure will differ from church to church: sometimes the entire congregation votes in an annual meeting, sometimes an elected governing body is empowered to decide. Read your congregation's constitution or bylaws and consult with your church's leadership to decide the right time and place for the vote. Remember: a covenant affirms your relationship with God, and therefore should be framed by prayer and worship.

Step 10: Certify and celebrate

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. 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. Members of the congregation should stand in body or spirit and read the covenant together. Invite members who live with mental health challenges and family members to give public testimony. The choice of hymns, music, readings and the sermon should be appropriate for the occasion.

Step 11: Publicize and evangelize

If you don't publicize your covenant widely, your community won't know that you're a Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged congregation. Publicity is not 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.

Step 12: Turn to the future

As you live into your WISE covenant, your congregation will open up to new opportunities for mission, ministry and evangelism. To keep the momentum going, form a standing WISE committee to explore ways your covenant can have an impact. After one or two years, consider charting the progress you've made, and to inform planning for your next steps.