

Our Journey to Becoming WISE

Central Square Congregational Church, UCC

The World Health Organization definition of mental health is “state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well, and work well, and contribute to their community... it is a basic human right.” The Mental Health Network W.I.S.E. program, (**W**elcoming, **I**nclusive, **S**upportive, and **E**ngaged) provides a path for congregations, associations, conferences and nonprofit organizations to join to reduce stigma and promote mental well-being.

In June of 2022, the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ officially became a WISE conference. Debbie Ringen, SNEUCC Minister for Health and Wellness said, “Romans 12:5 reminds us that *‘We, who are many, are one body in Christ’*. We can welcome all people when we challenge negative attitudes toward mental health and neurodiversity, question our assumptions, and correct misinformation about mental health challenges, substance use disorders, trauma, and brain differences.”

- WISE certification is a public positioning that our welcome is extended specifically to people with mental illness/brain disorders.
- Becoming WISE gives us access to even more resources on the UCC Mental Health Network as well as to consulting and peer collaboration.
- WISE is a natural extension of Open & Affirming.
- WISE certification differentiates CSCCUCC when engaging with mental health organizations.

In 2023, Rev. Beth Stotts approached several members of the congregation regarding becoming a WISE congregation through the UCC Mental Health Network. Officially an “Open and Affirming” congregation since 2014, we immediately recognized that WISE was consistent with our O&A stance and that it would be a natural progression in terms of demonstrably widening our welcome.

Here’s how our rollout went:

Step 1: Form a WISE team.

Mental health is already a visible issue within our congregation. In large part, our team members have personal experience with mental illness either as individuals or through relatives. Our congregation also has an unusual number of mental health practitioners, social workers, and nurses. Our WISE team includes the following members: Heather Ciaramitaro, Stephanie Holmgren, our deacons, Deb Sorgman and Anne Malmquist, and our pastor, Rev. Beth Stotts.

Step 2: Connect with the UCC Mental Health Network and examine available resources.

Reverend Beth and several members of the congregation took advantage of conference resources, workshops, and classes about WISE and mental health resources in our area. The toolkit on this page (<http://mhn-ucc.blogspot.com/p/becoming-wise-congregation-toolkit.html>) proved very valuable in guiding us through the WISE process and identifying resources. Likewise, we quickly sent an email to mhnucc@gmail.com letting the national UCC team know of our interest in becoming WISE.

Step 3: Invite leadership into the process.

We shared our idea with the leadership of the church and asked for their guidance to proceed with the process. Leadership agreed that working to de-stigmatizing mental health was important for our congregation to engage in. We gave monthly updates to the Cabinet in order to ensure that WISE was well understood by our leaders, to give leaders ample time to provide feedback, and to help ensure that they would support taking the proposal to a congregational vote.

Step 4: Engage the congregation.

We reached out to the congregation and invited feedback on how we could best move through the process by circulating a survey. Through the survey, we discovered that the congregation was interested in learning more about mental wellness, and their biggest concerns were around managing stress and anxiety.

Step 5: Educate the congregation.

We developed an approach that leads to the congregation's vote to become a WISE Congregation for Mental Health. To get the word out, and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness, we organized the following successful activities during the 2024-2025 church year:

- Included an invitation to folks with mental health challenges in our weekly welcome during worship services.
- Requested prayers for those dealing with mental health challenges during the "Prayers of the People" segment of our worship service.
- At a Kids Church sleepover, we watched the movie "Inside Out" and held a discussion after about understanding big emotions.
- Organized an intergenerational outing to see the movie "Inside Out 2" with discussion that followed.
- Invited a local therapist to preach a sermon about the intersection of faith and mental wellness.
- Hosted Mental Health First Aid training at the church.

- Held a community book study and discussion on the book “Blessed are the Crazy” by Sarah Lund Griffith.
- Promoted workshops and webinars about mental health challenges, substance use disorders, trauma, and brain differences.
- The Deacons led different weekly Mental Wellness practices in worship during the season of Lent.
- Created a guide of local resources for Mental Wellness available in the church office.
- Prepared a WISE statement and covenant.

Step 6: Drafted the WISE Covenant

First, we reviewed the sample covenant on the UCC MHN, which provided an excellent framework for the document. The pastor then wrote the initial draft of our Covenant. Team members were then given the opportunity to review and comment on the Covenant. In addition, we sent the draft document to the national UCC team for validation that we were on the right track.

Step 7: Vote

We anticipate to have the vote take place at our annual congregational meeting in June 2025.

Step 8: Certify and celebrate being WISE

Once the covenant is approved by the congregation, we will then inform the national UCC mental health team that our Covenant has been approved. Once we receive an email stating that our document had been accepted and that we were now officially a WISE congregation, the news will be shared with the congregation by the pastor during worship.

Step 9: Publicize

Immediately following certification, we will issue a press release to the local print media affirming CSCCUCC’s welcoming stance toward people with mental illness / brain disorders. Our hope is that this news further differentiates us among local churches and compels people looking for an open, accepting congregation to come worship with us.

Step 10: Turn to the Future

Moving forward, our goal is to continue providing support beyond our congregation and into the wider community. One idea we have is to conduct a Mental Health Open House open to the community during Mental Health Awareness Month, featuring a variety of local service providers.