

# **Our Journey:**

## **How our Church started and grew a WISE Team**



Wise Team  
The United Church of Christ at  
The Villages, Florida  
[www.VillagesUCC.org](http://www.VillagesUCC.org)



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## **Introduction**

Starting and growing our church's Mental Health Ministry has been, and continues to be, an effort by a group of lay church members and by clergy. Our ministry has been enriched by each person who has been involved, and I am grateful to everyone.

The Mental Health Ministry started with a simple request. I was asked to contact Judy Johnson, member of the UCC Mental Health Network. She presented a workshop on "How to become a WISE congregation". It was an inspiring day.

I came to believe there was more that we could do at church. What could we do to support one another? What if we could say the words "mental health" with a clear voice? What if we could educate ourselves about these challenges? What if we could meet together and freely share our stories?

In time, I invited interested church members and friends to join in a book study, reading and discussing a book about mental health. I thought no one might show up that would want to participate but was grateful when a group of about 10 people attended.

This was the start of the journey of our Mental Health Ministry, and it continues to grow and evolve. I am taking this opportunity to share the "basics" of the different activities/programs/documents we have developed. UCC at the Villages is located in a retirement community and averages 75-125 people at worship each week.

Becky Dunning,  
Member, UCC at The Villages  
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## **GETTING STARTED**

Having one or two people share their story is a way to make the subject of mental health real. It is not “someone else,” it is us. Mental health issues affect many people; one in four adults in the U.S. will have some sort of mental health challenge in any given year. Yet we usually keep these issues hidden, not wanting to make ourselves vulnerable in church, or elsewhere. But the church community is a place where we have the opportunity to receive support, and to give support to others.

But sharing a story, especially about the subject of mental health, needs to be done with respect and dignity for everyone. Sharing a story, weaving it into ways the church can be involved, is an opportunity to bring these personal challenges into the life of the church. Treat each story with respect.

At the same time, it is important from the very outset, that people feel that attending any Mental Health event, discussion or other activity, is “safe”. There is no expectation that people will be asked to share their own mental health issues, their diagnosis, or their personal details. Merely attending a mental health event, and having an interest in this subject, is enough. Making all Mental Health events “safe” has been an important overall goal.

Church members were invited to attend a 6-week book study. We began by reading:

- ***Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the silence about mental illness, family and church.*** The Rev. Sarah Griffith Lund, UCC minister Chalice Press, 2014.

We loved it so much, we just continued reading. We read:

- ***The Lifesaving Church.*** By UCC Pastor, The Rev. Dr. Rachael Keefe. Published by Chalice Press, 2018
- ***Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness.*** By William Styron, Open Road Integrated Media
- ***A Pelican of the Wilderness: Depression, Psalms, Ministry and Movies.*** By The Rev. Robert W. Griggs, Cascade Books, 2014.
- ***Sermon Reviews:*** The Rev. Timothy Ahrens (UCC, Columbus, OH) (mhn-ucc.org) has written a 5-part sermon series, ***Mental Illness: The Journey In, The Journey Out.***
  - a. When Mental Illness Hits: Out of the Depths I Cry to You.***
  - b. Depression: From the Pit of Despair We Can Rise In New Life.***
  - c. Family Struggles with Mental illness: Finding Our WayHome***
  - d. The Resurrected Mind***
  - e. Blessed are The Stigma Busters***

The name of the book study was...**Mental Health Spiritual Support Book Study.** It is important to call activities associated with the Mental Health Ministry (even before it is an official ministry) what it is...i.e. use the words “Mental Health” There is no need, or advantage, of calling it anything else. Naming it, and being proud of it, goes a long way in starting to normalize the use of the words “mental health”.

## **SUPPORT FROM CLERGY**

Having support from the clergy is essential, from the very beginning. It is helpful if there is one clergy person who is the liaison to the Mental Health Ministry; this clergy can be the person to consult with as the ministry moves forward. One model of a Mental Health Ministry is to have clergy take the lead; the model we have adopted is one that is lay-led, but with active participation and support by clergy. We have one clergy person who is our liaison, who attends and participates in activities as time permits.

Weekly inclusive language from the pulpit is a wonderful way to keep the subject of mental health in the open. During the welcome, clergy can use their own words, including welcoming people with all mental and physical abilities....even a simple phrase like this, repeated in some way every week, gives the message of inclusion to all. It helps to normalize the issue of mental health at church.



## MENTAL HEALTH MINISTRY PLANNING GUIDE

A planning guide was developed as we envisioned the Mental Health Ministry:

### 1. What will be the focus of the ministry team?

Mental health challenges can affect persons of any age, race, religion, gender identity or socioeconomic status. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that 18% of all U.S. adults experience a mental illness (ranging from no or mild impairment to significantly disabling impairment) in a given year. People affected by mental illness include our church members, our friends and families, and ourselves, as well as all the people who support those experiencing mental illness. But stigma exists around these issues. Persons with mental health issues often experience isolation, shame, silence, denial and discrimination.

It is the calling of the church to follow Jesus' commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself". Jesus included all people in this commandment, and we want to follow this calling. As a church ministry, we seek to include all our members and friends in the life of the church, to provide opportunities to reduce stigma for those with mental health challenges, to share our stories, to educate ourselves around these issues and to remind us that we are loved as children of God, just as we are.

### 2. What issue, need or injustice will the Ministry be working on?

We are working on the issue of stigma and silence around mental health and mental illness. Many people experience this in all walks of life. We want our church to be a community that reduces this stigma and silence and moves forward with respect and inclusion so that each person can be integrated into the full life of the church.

### 3. What is your understanding of the Gospel's response to this situation?

Jesus tells us to "love our neighbor as ourselves". We want to see each person as the blessed individual they are, as seen by God, without judgment. We want to welcome and include each person in our community. We commit to being a community that embodies the healing power of Christ.

### 4. What activities will we do?

We will be involved in a variety of activities, including educational programs, discussions, a support group, worship inclusion and other opportunities as we learn about mental health, support each other, and work to reduce stigma. Our activities will develop over time.

### 5. What have we experienced in our work so far? What have we learned?

An initial six-session book study was held in June 2016. Group members read and discussed ***Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the silence about mental illness, family and church***. By Sarah Griffith Lund, Chalice Press, 2014.

Sarah writes about her personal journey growing up in a family with mental illness. These sessions showed that there is a lot of interest in the subject of mental health/illness in our community. People want to talk about their experiences about the subject. At the same time, they want to do this in a place that is safe and confidential within our church setting.

### 6. What resources do we have for this ministry? Who is on our team?

Our resources are the people at our church and in our community, who are interested in

this subject. We have identified a team of lay persons and clergy who are committed to moving ahead with this ministry.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT**

A confidentiality statement is important in a Mental Health Ministry. This or a similar statement is read aloud before each Mental Health Ministry activity.

**As a Mental Health Ministry, we seek to be a safe place where we can share information, ideas and feelings with each other, as well as offering support, respect and acceptance of each person. Anything of a personal nature that is shared within this gathering will be kept confidential and not shared outside the group, unless the individual gives explicit consent. The only exception is if someone is a danger to themselves or others, in which case this information will be communicated to the appropriate mental health professional by a designated leader. Each person will agree to this statement as shown by their presence here today.**



## **MENTAL HEALTH MINISTRY FORUMS**

Forums are held 4 times a year and cover a wide range of topics related to mental health. Each Forum lasts 75 minutes. They have an educational focus and include speakers, discussions, videos, and other program content. Some of the Forum topics were suggested and presented by church members and community members.

Our Forums always have a time of discussion and exchange of ideas. Depending on the subject matter, this can be a question/answer session, or a time for small group discussions. Numerous comments have been made that the small group discussions are most appreciated. Programs end with a light meal and more conversation.

Places to look for ideas for content include:

- the UCC Mental Health Network website ([mhn-ucc.org](http://mhn-ucc.org)). **The Journey** is a weekly blog which can be read aloud and discussed in small groups.
- TED talks
- NAMI (National Alliance for Mental Illness) website (NAMI.org)
- Mentalhealthministries.net has many videos
- Local community organizations with a connection to mental health
- Introduction to Meditation
- Book Review: "The Day I Died: Brain Trauma and the Journey Back" by Carole Petiet
- Video: "A Father's and Son's Perspective on Mental Illness" by Alan Johnson
- Video: "My Love Affair with the Brain: The Life and Science of Dr. Marian Diamond"
- Movie: Lars and the Real Girl
- Mental Health Promotion Seminars: These seminars are designed to provide general information about mental health promotion, bringing in the relationship with our faith community. There are five 75-minute seminars which are available for viewing on the following website:  
<http://www.firstchurchberkeley.org/news/mental-health-promotion-seminar-videos> The seminars cover the following topics:
  - Mental Health - What Is It and Why Should I Care?
  - Mental Illness
  - Emotional Literacy
  - Suicide
  - Mindfulness

Each Forum opens with prayer and the confidentiality statement. A closing prayer ends the Forum. Then we adjourn to the Fellowship Hall for a light meal and more conversations

Forum topics we have covered include:

1. The Rev. Sarah Lund, Mhn-UCC.net . WISE- Chicago-2018. "The Power of a Personal Story and breaking the Silence of Mental Illness".
2. "A Beautiful Heart" by Todd W. Freeman, Member of UCC at The Villages.
3. NAMI speaker: The president of our local NAMI chapter (National Alliance on Mental Illness) discussed the program, followed by Q/A. You can find your local NAMI chapter at [nami.org](http://nami.org). The topic we heard was "Bridges of Hope"
4. "No Shame, No Secrets Having a family with mental illness and alcoholism" by Rosy Sylvania, Member of UCC at The Villages (Postponed).

## **MENTAL HEALTH SPIRITUAL SUPPORT GROUP**

The Mental Health Spiritual Support Group is designed to be a safe space to share our stories in a supportive faith-based environment. The group meets weekly (for 75 minutes) and is led by a facilitator.

### **Structure of the Spiritual Support Group:**

1. Light a candle
2. Reading the **Guidelines** aloud
3. Opening scripture
4. Opening prayer
5. Check-in: Everyone is invited to say a few sentences as a check-in.
6. No one interrupts or does backtalk during this time. Anyone can pass.  
The facilitators lead a general discussion and sharing time. Often our discussion is based on the book we are reading. There could have been a theme that has arisen from the initial check-in time, or someone may bring up a topic of interest. The facilitator can also bring up a subject of discussion. Conversation between participants is allowed.  
The facilitator uses their skills to encourage discussion without having one or two people dominate the time. Expressions of how one's faith have affected the situation are encouraged.
7. Closing with prayer
8. Blow out the candle
9. Conclude with the Serenity Prayer

**Guidelines for the Spiritual Support Group:** this is read aloud at the beginning of each group. The guidelines are printed and passed from one person to the next, with an invitation to read one section and pass it to the next person.

1. We honor each other's presence by listening carefully, mindfully and actively to one another.
2. We seek to provide a safe environment in which each person can share without judgment.
3. We allow each person time and opportunity to express themselves. However, it is OK to remain silent during group sharing. You can say "pass" at any time.
4. We are here to share our own personal experiences, what we have learned, and what has been helpful or not helpful. Our purpose is to support one another, not to resolve difficulties or to offer advice or solutions to problems. Be mindful that

some people may not wish to engage in further discussion after the group.

5. Share feelings as well as thoughts, including personal insights about your spiritual experiences. Encouragement and support of one another is welcomed.
6. If a person needs to leave the group at any time, they are free to do so.
7. We honor **confidentiality** as follows:

As a Mental Health Spiritual Support Group, we seek to be a safe place where we can share information, ideas and feelings with each other, as well as offering support, respect and acceptance of each person. Anything of a personal nature that is shared within this gathering will be kept confidential and not shared outside the group, unless the individual gives explicit consent. The only exception is if someone is a danger to themselves or others, in which case the information will be communicated to the appropriate clergy or mental health professional by the facilitator.

Each person will agree to this confidentiality statement as shown by their presence here today.

## **COMPANIONSHIP TEAM**

Companionship is a ministry of presence, a relationship responding to isolation and suffering, and supportive of healing and recovery. Companionship welcomes the stranger, building a circle of care in a public space with individuals who are facing emotional and mental health challenges.

At the time of this writing, we do not have a Companionship Program. A Companionship Program would give us grounding and skills in the basic process in which companionship takes shape - a flow from observing and approaching into a shared journey which leads to creating a caring community and mutual well-being. Information about Companionship can be found on the **Pathways to Promise** website ([pathways2promise.org](http://pathways2promise.org)). A useful guidebook is ***The Way of Companionship: Welcoming the Stranger***, available through Pathways to Promise.

Companionship is rooted in our natural capacity to be sensitive, compassionate and concerned. Companions observe and approach individuals using the **five basic practices of Companionship**:

- **Hospitality**: With hospitality, we approach another person with respect and honor the dignity inherent in every human being. Hospitality creates a peaceful space with another. Hospitality shares calm, rest and refreshment in an often tense, confusing and traumatic world.
- **Neighboring**: Neighboring invites us to discover what we have in common with another person, to set aside our power and privilege and to meet one another as equals.
- **Sharing the journey side-by-side**: This positions us to look out at the world together acknowledging our different backgrounds and viewpoints, proceeding with integrity, not pushing, pulling or imposing our priorities.
- **Listening**: We are opened to another's story by listening, hearing the person's own account, beginning in the now, exploring gently the past and what the future holds.
- **Accompaniment**: We listen for what the person says is their need and support them in connecting with community resources and help build a circle of care.

We want a Companionship Team that serves as Sunday Companions, being present before, during and after worship to respond to “in-the-moment” mental health challenges. We would meet monthly to support one another and to reflect on our experiences.

### MENTAL HEALTH SUNDAY

Mental Health Sunday is recognized by the UCC as the third Sunday in May (or any Sunday that suits our schedule). This is an opportunity to highlight mental health in the public worship space and is a way for a congregation to provide awareness and support around mental health challenges.

Many resources are available from the UCC Mental Health Network ([mhn-ucc.org](http://mhn-ucc.org)) to help plan a Mental Health Sunday. These include:

- Resource Guide for Mental Health Sunday Worship Services
- Prayers
- Sermons
- Scriptural Resources
- Hymns
- Liturgy
- Sermon ideas from an African-American perspective
- Litany for Mental Health Sunday from a minority perspective
- Tips on Getting Ready for Mental Health Sunday
- Bulletin inserts:
  - ***5 simple things you can to do make the world a better place for people with mental illnesses and their families***
  - ***Did you know....? (5 facts about mental illness)***

The Mental Health Sunday worship service can be enhanced when it is a collaboration between clergy and lay members. We have not had the opportunity to experience **A Mental Health Sunday** at this time.

## **MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID**

**Mental Health First Aid** ([mentalhealthfirstaid.org](http://mentalhealthfirstaid.org)) is a national program designed to teach the skills to respond to the signs of mental illness and substance use. Participants learn risk factors and warning signs for mental health and addiction concerns, strategies for how to help someone in both crisis and non-crisis situations, and where to turn for help.

Mental Health First Aid teaches about *recovery* and *resiliency* - the belief that individuals experiencing these challenges can and do get better, and use their strengths to stay well. Participants learn how to apply the **Mental Health First Aid Action Plan** in a variety of situations, including when someone is experiencing:

- panic attacks
- suicidal thoughts or behaviors
- non-suicidal self-injury
- acute psychosis (e.g hallucinations or delusions)
- overdose or withdrawal from alcohol or drug use
- reaction to a traumatic event

The opportunity to practice - through role plays, scenarios, and activities - makes it easier to apply these skills in a real-life situation.

Mental Health First Aid is taught by train instructors and is an 8-hour course. More information can be found on the website listed above. (The above description is taken from the MHFA website).



## **Health Community Resource List**

A **Mental Health Community Resource** List is an opportunity to have information available for those needing services.

Resources can include:

- Local NAMI affiliate (National Alliance on Mental Illness: [nami.org](http://nami.org).) NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for millions of Americans affected by mental illness. NAMI raises awareness and provides support and education throughout the country.
- Crisis hotlines lines
- National Suicide Prevent Lifeline (1-800-273-8255)
- Mental Health clinics
- Drop-in Centers
- County Mental Health Department services
- Legal Aid
- Addiction services
- Counseling centers
- Mobile Crisis Units

Locating resources in your community can start by contacting our local County Mental Health Department, 2-1-1 information line (2-1-1 is a free service that helps people across the U.S. find local resources; website: [www.211.org](http://www.211.org) or simply call 211), local NAMI affiliate, and the local library.



## **OPENING AND CLOSING PRAYERS**

All activities, meetings and gatherings of the Mental Health Ministry open with prayer, followed by the Confidentiality Statement (see p.8). Often there are people who are willing to spontaneously say prayers, and this is encouraged. If not, prayers can be read aloud.

**Opening Prayers:** The following Opening Prayers have been taken from the UCC Mental Health Ministry website ([mhn-ucc.org](http://mhn-ucc.org)), and more can be found there:

Let us pray: God, we are all seekers. No matter where we are in the world, no matter what our strengths or weaknesses are, you seek us out with love. No matter that you are always present with and for us, no matter that we do not always recognize the form, no matter that we may have a dimness of sight, we continue to seek you with the human desire to know you and to rest in you. Guide us now to recognize that truth.

Amen

Let us pray: God, Let us cast all our anxiety on you as we seek to follow in your footsteps. Even when we feel abandoned, even when we suffer physically and mentally and emotionally, we ask that you will help us to remember that we are, no matter what, your children. We want to remain steadfast in our faith because we know there are many who share in our suffering. Direct us toward them that we will not shy away, but instead deeply engage those who are in need of your love. Amen

Let us pray: God calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, the one who is happy and the one who is sad, the one who is weak and the one who is strong, the one who is embraced and the one who is shunned, the one who is like us and the one who is different. We come together, every one of us, trusting God's abundant love. Amen

Let us pray: We live in communities where there are people whose lives are challenged by mental illness and brain disorders. These people and their loved ones often feel overwhelmed and isolated. Holy One, create in us a tenderness to the needs of all, an openness to everyone's gifts, and a commitment to the struggle for justice. Amen

Let us pray: God of love, stir in us deep compassion for people living with brain disorders and their families. Raise our awareness of how we can create a supportive and safe spiritual community for people who feel isolated. Inspire us to reach out in love as a sign of your radical hospitality and grace. Encourage us to receive the gifts that are given by all. Amen

Let us pray: God of love, we celebrate that today you are still speaking words of acceptance, wholeness and inclusion. We give thanks for this church and the ways we seek to live out Jesus' commandment to love you, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen

Let us pray: Loving Creator, we pray for all those who live with mental illness and those who love them. So many are hurt by unkind comments and unwitting prejudice due to ignorance. We pray that all people will come to realize that mental illnesses are just that, illnesses. May our eyes be opened to see the whole person and not just the illness.

When we ourselves are having mental health struggles, may we be open to receive the companionship that is offered. And as followers of Jesus, may we offer that companionship to those in need. Amen

**Closing Prayer:** We close our gatherings with the same prayer at each gathering (unless someone is called to offer their own prayer):

Let us pray: Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.

As messengers of faith, giving hope and confidence and peace, you are blessed today by God, the creating one, by Jesus Christ, the redeeming one, and by the Holy Spirit, the sustaining one. Amen



## **MENTAL HEALTH MINISTRY LEADERSHIP TEAM**

Everyone has been invited to join our leadership team. Rather than inviting the people who seem most suited to a leadership role, an open invitation has resulted in volunteers who are called to this ministry. The participation of an expanded group of people will enrich our team. Our clergy liaison is always invited to these meetings.

We have meetings on an as needed basis, following an agenda. Follow-up notes are sent out after the meeting.

Meetings include updates of activities, planning, and discussion of concerns and ideas.

## **WISE EXPLORATORY GROUP**

The “Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged (WISE) Congregations for Mental Health” Resolution was passed at the 2015 UCC General Synod. Local congregations have the opportunity to explore becoming “WISE”, writing their own covenant, and taking a vote. If approved by the congregation, the WISE Covenant is submitted to the UCC Mental Health Network, which then can officially certify the church as a **WISE Congregation for Mental Health**.

After six months of Mental Health Ministry activities, we were ready to take the steps to consider becoming a WISE Congregation for Mental Health. The WISE process will be introduced during Mental Health month, to the Diaconate first and then the Governing Board and finally a congregational vote

Our WISE Group worked together to:

- Review the 10-step approach to become a WISE Congregation  
(see Mental Health Network website: [mhn-ucc.org](http://mhn-ucc.org))
- Draft the WISE Covenant
- We are prepared to share the WISE process with Governing Board and keep the pastor and congregation apprised on all activities.

## **THE WISE VOTE**

It has been important throughout the WISE process that church members have numerous opportunities to learn about WISE. We informed the congregation about WISE in these ways:

- Introduction of WISE during announcements on Sunday morning during services
- All were invited
- All were invited to each book study.
- All were invited to attend each Mental Health Educational Forum.
- All were invited to join WISE Spiritual Support Group
- All were kept updated through articles printed in our Monthly Reporter.

## **OUR COVENANT**

Our purpose is to be A WISE Congregation for Mental Health for all with mental health challenges and their loved ones.

We, the people of The United Church of Christ at The Villages, know we are graced by gifts, stories and experiences of all members, including those living with mental health challenges such as, but not limited to, mental illnesses, brain disorders, addictions, and trauma. We care about the whole person: body, mind and spirit. We affirm the deep and constant movement of God's Holy Spirit, seeking to bring us to the fullness of life. We believe that all people are beloved by God, and if a person has a mental health challenge that person has a right to be seen as a person first. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus made no distinction between various members of society; and did not show any partiality. Jesus included all people in this commandment.

Sometimes individuals with mental health challenges, such as brain disorders, mental illnesses, addictions, and their loved ones, feel cut off from God and do not feel included. It is our calling to communicate to all individuals that God loves all of us equally, even when we do not feel the love of the Holy Spirit in our lives. People with mental health challenges have gifts to be offered in our faith community, and we want everyone to feel fully welcomed, included, supported and engaged in the life, work and leadership of our church.

We, the United Church of Christ at The Villages, vote to continue to be a *welcoming, inclusive, supportive and engaged* (WISE) congregation for mental health.

### **Call to action:**

**We pledge to create a *welcoming* environment for all people including those with mental health challenges and their families:**

- We pledge to educate ourselves and offer educational opportunities to help our whole congregation understand the issues surrounding the mental health challenges such as mental illnesses/brain disorders, addictions and trauma and the implications of this covenant.
- In an effort to reduce social stigma, we pledge to examine our own attitudes and preconceived notions about mental health challenges and mental health and to confront our own ingrained stigma.
- We pledge to actively welcome everyone into our open, inclusive and affirmative faith community and provide a safe environment in which people can tell their stories and share their journeys.

**We pledge to *include* all people in the life, work and leadership of the congregation:**

- We commit to supporting all persons to serve on teams and in leadership positions within the congregation, we pledge to be open to consider hiring all qualified individuals.

**We pledge to support people in our congregation who have mental health challenges and their families:**

- We pledge to reach out to those suffering from brain disorders/mental illnesses, addictions, and trauma in the same way we reach out to those with other physical illnesses.

**We pledge to *engage* with other organizations that work at the intersection of mental health and faith/spirituality/religion:**

- We pledge to engage with other organizations to find opportunities to be in shared mission, ministry and advocacy together. This includes working with our church's WISE team, and the conference UCC Mental Health Network and the UCC Disabilities Ministry.

This vote affirms that we join in the process of always becoming more welcoming, inclusive, supportive, and engaged with all of God's people.



## **MOVING FORWARD**

The journey of becoming a WISE Congregation for Mental Health has been important in increasing our awareness and knowledge about mental health. It has also given us a model as we support and engage with our members, friends and loved ones experiencing mental health challenges. Our journey will continue as we live into our WISE Covenant.

