

A Resolution Declaring the Indiana-Kentucky Conference a WISE Conference for Mental Health

Presented to the 2020 Annual Gathering by the Board of Directors of the Indiana-Kentucky Conference of the United Church of Christ

Summary

1 in 4 adults and children living in the Indiana-Kentucky region have a mental health challenge, including a substance use disorder, impacting their daily lives. Due to long-standing and ever-present social stigma, many individuals with mental illness do not seek out needed treatment or access community supports for their mental health needs. Others lack adequate financial means to access treatment and supports.

While dominant media narratives and socio-political discourse would depict individuals with mental health challenges as dangerous threats to public safety, statistics indicate that those with mental health challenges are up to ten times as likely to be the victims of violence as the general population. This social stigma and resulting community isolation contribute to lower rates of employment and higher rates of homelessness and incarceration.

Too often, this stigma extends into the church, one place where every child of God should find support and be nurtured in their spiritual, mental, emotional and physical needs. All persons who enter our doors should feel safe and welcomed in the totality of their being. Yet, in ways both interpersonal and systemic, Christians have participated in the stigmatization and exclusion of individuals experiencing mental health challenges.

In recent years, the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network has made a concerted effort to support local churches in addressing mental health stigma through its Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged (WISE) initiative. The objective of WISE is to encourage UCC congregations to become more welcoming of those living with mental health challenges, to expand church and community inclusion of those who are living with mental health challenges, to be supportive of all who are affected by mental health challenges, and to engage in ways to live out a commitment to be WISE about mental health.

It is in this spirit of unconditional love and radical welcome that this resolution is offered.

Biblical, Theological and Historical Grounding

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30, NRSV)

From the early historic roots of the United Church of Christ and carrying through to our contemporary church bodies, it is part of our denominational identity and theology to contemplate and practice our love of God by loving our neighbors and ourselves, in body, heart, soul, and mind, in practical and life-giving ways.

We proclaim as central to the faith life of our conference this commandment Jesus offers in the Gospel according to Mark. In practice, this commandment calls the Indiana-Kentucky Conference (IKC) to understand mental health challenges as a natural part of the intersectional human experience and to honor the inherent wholeness of individuals with mental health challenges through its programming, missions, and ministries.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35, NRSV)

The church united in Christ is called to be a community that breaks through fear and isolation to offer love, hope, care and healing through providing compassion, companionship, and support. In the ways the church has used holy scripture to discriminate against mental illness, used prayer as a weapon against those seeking treatment, and demonized those experiencing mental health challenges as dangerous, we confess our sins.

We proclaim as central to the faith life of our conference this commandment Jesus offers in the Gospel according to John. In practice, this commandment calls the IKC to walk alongside local ministries and members engaged in efforts to reduce stigma and enhance inclusion in their communities for those with mental health challenges and their communities of support, and to, whenever feasible, offer tangible supports towards these local and conference-wide efforts.

In adopting this resolution we would be joining the wider United Church of Christ, who in 1995 passed a resolution proclaiming justice for those with serious mental illness, who in 2015 passed a resolution encouraging congregations to become WISE, and in 2019 voted to recognize those with mental health challenges as an historically underrepresented group. With these historical foundations and the work designed by the Mental Health Network of the United Church of Christ, the IKC would stand in an historical line of justice advocacy around mental health.

The Text of the Resolution

WHEREAS, 1 in 4 people experience some form of mental health challenges and;

WHEREAS, there is continued stigma, discrimination, pain, and silence that occurs in society and within our churches against individuals with mental health challenges;

WHEREAS, Indiana and Kentucky have suicide rates of 16.3 and 16.9 per 100,000, respectively, well above the national average of 14.0, according to 2017 data from the Centers for Disease Control;

WHEREAS, Indiana and Kentucky are consistently ranked poorly on access to mental health care and overall mental health outcomes in annual reports published by Mental Health America;

WHEREAS, marginalized populations, particularly persons in jails/prisons, persons experiencing homelessness, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, experience systemic barriers to adequate mental health services;

WHEREAS, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ has on three separate occasions adopted resolutions supporting the increased inclusion of individuals with mental health challenges in the fullness of the life of the church;

WHEREAS, the Florida and Northern California Nevada Conferences have adopted WISE covenants at the Conference level;

WHEREAS, the Indiana-Kentucky Conference recognizes the need for increased inclusion of those with mental health challenges and their communities of support in the full life of the Conference;

WHEREAS, we recognize that the communities of support for people with mental health challenges often do not have their own emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical needs met in local ministry settings;

WHEREAS, we recognize the need to support the well-being and mental health of all our authorized ministers;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that we the Indiana-Kentucky Conference (IKC) of the United Church of Christ, in its commitment to the work of justice and inclusion for all

people as image-bearers of the divine, designate ourselves as a WISE Conference for Mental Health.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the IKC convene a WISE Team to develop a strategic plan for implementing WISE at the conference level, including consideration of possible education and training needs, financial support, personnel, and opportunities for collaboration with existing community resources.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the IKC, through the WISE Team, the Conference Staff and the Board of Directors, identify and pursue opportunities to be in shared mission, ministry, fellowship and advocacy with other faith and community organizations, including the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network, the United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries, and the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we encourage associations and local ministry settings to develop and adopt covenants to be WISE for Mental Health and to work to understand the needs and experiences of those living with mental health challenges and their communities of support within their local and regional settings.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, we encourage local ministry settings to work to eradicate stigma around mental illnesses and substance use disorders, to offer support to all persons affected by mental health challenges, and to advocate for access to adequate treatment options for all persons but especially for persons in jails/prisons, persons experiencing homelessness, and BIPOC communities.

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, we encourage congregations to offer regular feedback to the IKC WISE Team as it works to implement WISE at the conference level.

FUNDING

The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the WISE Committee and Board of Directors as funds are available.

IMPLEMENTATION

The WISE Team in consultation with the Conference Staff and Board of Directors.

The WISE Team will design a strategic plan outlining Conference priorities and new opportunities for mission and ministry to be presented to the Board of Directors of the IKC prior to the 2022 Annual Gathering.

Proposed to the Board of Directors of the Indiana Kentucky Conference for consideration for the 2020 Annual Gathering by the WISE Team.