

BECOMING A WISE CONGREGATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH

By Amy Petré Hill

An All-Too-Common Story of Mental Health Stigma for Older Adults

Desmond, a long-serving, beloved ruling-elder, has shared his gifts of vitality, love for children, sharp mind, and knowledge of accounting with his congregation every year. However, after his retirement at age 72 from a successful career as a CPA, Desmond has transformed. His vitality has dimmed; he comes to church less often, struggles to complete his volunteer tasks for the church, and is less available to meet with church friends. When Desmond and his spouse, Jackie, are kindly asked about their increasing absence from church and Desmond's noticeable change by the pastor, the couple provides vague answers. They explain Desmond is "just adjusting to retirement, and it is taking time," and he has "some health issues he's working on, but he'll be fine." Unaware that Desmond may be dealing with a mental health challenge, the pastor and elders don't push as they respect the couple's privacy.

Nine months after his retirement, Jackie confidentially shares with her best friend that Desmond is receiving care for major depression. Desmond didn't want to admit there was a problem, arguing that he was "just over the hill, and it's all downhill from here." Jackie realized something was seriously wrong when Desmond stopped eating regularly and couldn't get out of bed for a week due to exhaustion and low mood. She became frightened when Desmond began saying, "we'd all be better off if I were gone." and called her family's Primary Care Physician (PCP). The PCP ensured Desmond was not an immediate danger to himself or others and convinced him to come in for a check-up the next day. The check-up confirmed that Desmond's physical health was good. Still, a simple depression screening revealed that Desmond was struggling with major depression. After some resistance, Desmond started seeing a counselor and meets with his PCP regularly to monitor his anti-depression medication. His mood is improving, and he is beginning to re-engage with activities he enjoys, like playing golf and participating in a men's book club. He has also started planning for the future vacations he and Jackie have always dreamed of taking.

Jackie is grateful Desmond is recovering, but she feels worn out and alone. She misses attending church and feeling support from the congregation. She wishes she could ask for prayers from her women's bible study group or talk to her pastor. However, mental illness is not an issue spoken about in her church, and Desmond has sworn her to silence. He fears church leaders will find him an unfit member, lacking faith and willpower, if they know about his depression diagnosis. So he is staying away from church until he feels he is "back to his old self." Unfortunately, even if Jackie and Desmond return, their fear of judgment will keep them from bringing their selves and their stories into the love and support of their congregation.

The Mental Health Crisis In Our County

According to the US Centers for Disease Control, happiness typically increases with age: older adults tend to have higher rates of life satisfaction than younger adults. However, the American Psychological Association finds that one in four adults aged 65

and older deal with mental health and cognitive challenges that negatively impact their lives. People age 85 and older have the highest suicide rate of any group in the United States: older white men die by suicide at a rate nearly six times that of the general population. Because suicide is the second leading cause of death for Americans between 10 and 34, even if older adults are not struggling with a mental health challenge, their children and grandchildren may.

Depression, the most prevalent mental health challenge among older adults, often goes unrecognized because of the mistaken assumption that sadness is just a part of getting older. Depression is not mere sadness. Depression is a medical condition in which a person experiences ongoing symptoms like persistent sadness, withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities, difficulty sleeping, physical discomforts, and low energy. Anxiety, the second most common mental health challenge in the United States, is more than being worried. Anxiety is a mental health challenge where feelings of fear, worry, apprehension, or dread that is excessive or disproportional to the problems or situations that are feared. The two conditions often go together, and close to half of the older adults who are diagnosed with major depression also meet the criteria for anxiety. Fortunately, depression and anxiety are two of the most successfully treated illnesses, and there are numerous effective treatments for adults of any age. Most older adults with depression or anxiety can improve dramatically with treatment.

The tragedy is that the Centers for Disease Control report less than 50% of older adults suffering from a mental health challenge seek professional help. Fear of marginalization by community members, including fellow church members, keeps many older adults from seeking care that could significantly improve their quality of life. Because PCPs are now better trained, older adults can often receive appropriate medications and referrals to counselors in respectful partnership with their PCP.

Being WISE Saves Lives

Churches are vital in promoting the mental health of older adults by fighting the stigma around mental health challenges. Recent research demonstrates that individuals who are a part of a faith community are more likely to first reach out to clergy for help with a mental health problem. Thus, clergy and congregations have unique opportunities to positively impact the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of older adult members by creating an atmosphere of acceptance and encouraging everyone to seek appropriate care from mental health professionals when needed.

Becoming a WISE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged) for Mental Health certified congregation is one way churches can create faith communities of radical belonging. WISE Congregations reduce the stigma around mental illness and welcome everyone into the life, leadership, and saving work of the Body of Christ. WISE certification is a ten-step process available at no cost to from the UCC Mental Health Network at www.mhn-ucc.org to any church, presbytery, or synod. You can also download the “Becoming a WISE Congregation for Mental Health” guide for from this MHN website for free.

Becoming a WISE Congregation is a process, but any congregation can begin where they are by taking a few simple steps:

- Speaking of mental health challenges in the pulpit and praying for those living with both physical and mental illnesses during community prayer times.
- Inviting an older adult speaker from a local National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) chapter to speak about mental health and their mental health journey. NAMI (www.nami.org) is the most extensive grassroots education and advocacy group for individuals and families living with mental health challenges in the USA. It provides classes and support groups across the USA.
- Hosting a Mental Health First Aid Training (www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org) for church members and the broader community. Mental Health First Aid is an internationally recognized, skills-based training course that teaches anyone how to help someone experiencing a mental health crisis.
- Offering a Mental Health Sunday Worship in May to provide comfort and education to everyone in the congregation and the community impacted by mental illness. For sample services, go to: <http://mhn-ucc.blogspot.com/p/mental-health-sunday.html>.
- Starting a mental health book reading group or bible study. *Blessed are the Crazy* by Rev. Dr. Sarah Griffith Lund and *The Lifesaving Church: Faith Communities and Suicide Prevention* by Rev. Dr. Rachael Keefe are two excellent books for group discussion.
- Reaching out to Mental Health Network consultants to discuss how your congregation can become a more informed and radically inclusive faith community. I welcome congregations to contact me with questions at revamy@mhministries.org

Taking any of the above steps will strengthen the ministry of the church by creating a safe place where anyone - including older adults like Desmond and Jackie - can experience Christ's love and feel genuinely welcome no matter where they are on their life's journey.

Rev. Amy Petré Hill is the Minister of Mental Health and Inclusion at Mountain View United Church in Aurora, Colorado. Mountain View was the first WISE certified ecumenical church (Presbyterian USA, United Methodist, and United Church of Christ) and offers education and support to any faith community seeking to become WISE. She previously worked as a disability rights attorney, spiritual advisor to the Voices for Veterans Mental Health Council of Eastern Colorado, and a chaplain intern at a Colorado state psychiatric hospital. She is a member of POAMN, a certified Mental Health First Aid instructor, NAMI Group Facilitator, Soul Shop for Congregations trainer, and currently serves on the UCC Mental Health Network Board.

Ten Steps to Becoming a WISE Congregation for Mental Health

- 1. Consult with your minister(s).** Consulting with your lead clergy at the beginning allows them to educate themselves and resolve any concerns they may have early in the WISE process.
- 2. Form a WISE Team.** Gather a team of at least three and up to twelve people who share a passion for mental health, including individuals living with mental health challenges.
- 3. Connect with the UCC Mental Health Network and examine available resources.** No faith community needs to travel their WISE journey alone. Mental Health Network consultants and WISE Congregations are ready to support you with help, cheering, and prayers.
- 4. Develop an approach that leads to the congregation's vote to become a WISE Congregation for Mental Health.** This includes education sessions, partnerships with other mental health organizations, using language around mental health in sermons, and pastoral prayers.
- 5. Draft a WISE Covenant.** You can find samples of WISE Covenants already adopted by congregations around the country at www.mhn-ucc.org. Every WISE covenant is grounded in radical inclusion.
- 6. Involve your church's leadership in engaging the WISE covenant.** Ask session members, committees, and other leadership teams to read and discuss the proposed WISE covenant. People must have the opportunity to talk about the covenant before a congregational vote.
- 7. Vote on your WISE Covenant.** Voting empowers your congregation to “own” your WISE covenant.
- 8. Certify and celebrate becoming WISE.** Once the UCC Mental Health Network confirms your WISE process and covenant, your congregation will be nationally recognized as a WISE congregation.
- 9. Publicize.** Share your WISE commitment via local media, your presbytery, your synod, and local community organizations. You are now community leaders who can offer a welcoming place for worship and spiritual growth for often-marginalized members of the community seeking a faith home.
- 10. Turn to the future.** As you live into your WISE covenant, new opportunities for mission and ministry will emerge. Your experience will inspire the next faith community to become WISE for Mental Health.