

# **The Basics:**

**How one church started  
and grew a  
Mental Health Ministry**



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## Introduction

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

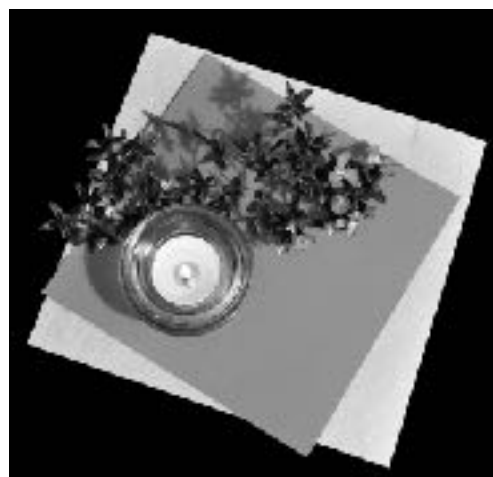
The Mental Health Ministry started with a simple true story. During worship on a Sunday in 2016, I shared the story of the mental health challenges in my family, focussing on how this experience has been for me over the years. I shared the support I received from a few trusted church friends and how I looked forward to the rest and refreshment I received each Sunday during worship, soaking in the beautiful music and the sacred space.

But I knew there was more we could do at church. During my time as a member of the UCC Mental Health Network ([mhn-ucc.org](http://mhn-ucc.org)), I had begun to have a glimpse of the rich and supportive body we had right here in our church community. 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?

After sharing my own story, I invited interested church members and friends to join in a book study, reading and discussing a book about mental health. I thought that a handful of people would want to participate, but was grateful when a group of over 30 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. First Church Berkeley is located in an urban area and averages 200-225 people at worship each week. Other churches are in different types of communities and have different attendance numbers. I encourage you to select content from this document which is most useful depending on your own congregation, and adapt it as appropriate. My hope is that material here will be useful for other churches in starting their own Mental Health Ministries. Please feel free to use any of this material, and alter it to your own needs.

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August 2018



## 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 3-session book study. Two recommended books for this are:

*A Pelican of the Wilderness: Depression, Psalms, Ministry and Movies.* By Robert W. Griggs, Cascade Books, 2014. (This is the book we read).

*Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the silence about mental illness, family and church.* By Sarah Griffith Lund, Chalice Press, 2014.

The name of the book study was...**Mental Health 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 the 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.

The “welcome” text used at First Church Berkeley is as follows (given with permission from our clergy):

Welcome to First Church Berkeley, United Church of Christ!

- Welcome to you if you are older or younger or a little bit of each
- Welcome if you are queer or straight or a little bit of each
- Welcome if you are doubting or believing or a little bit of each
- Welcome if your experience of God feels like being lost in the wilds of the woods or if you sense the Holy One within you as a still small voice - or maybe a little bit of each
- Welcome to people of all colors, all genders, all body shapes and sizes, **all mental, physical and emotional abilities**. Because you are here today, this body is whole and perfect.

# 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 in?

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, trainings, 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 you experienced in your work so far? What have you learned?

An initial three-session book study was held in June 2016. Church members read and discussed *A Pelican of the Wilderness: Depression, Psalms, Ministry, and Movies* by Robert Griggs, a UCC minister who writes about his personal journey 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 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 you have for this ministry? Who is on your team?

Our resources are the people at church who are interested in this subject and the clergy who have been very supportive. One lay person is on the UCC Mental Health Network. We have identified a team of lay persons who are committed to moving ahead with this ministry.



## Confidentiality Statement

A confidentiality statement is important in a Mental Health Ministry. Our 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 here will agree to this statement as shown by their presence.**





## Mental Health Ministry Forums

Forums are held monthly 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, movies, videos, sermon reviews, and other program content. Many of the Forum topics were suggested and presented by church 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.

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
- Local community organizations with a connection to mental health

Each Forum opens with prayer and the confidentiality statement. A closing prayer ends the Forum.

Forum topics we have covered include:

1. Sermon reviews: Rev. Timothy Ahrens (First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, OH) has written a 5-part sermon series, *Mental Illness: The Journey In, The Journey Out*. These are available on the MHN website ([mhn-ucc.org](http://mhn-ucc.org)). A sermon is read aloud at a Forum followed by small group discussions. Sermon titles include:
  - 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 Way Home*
  - d. *The Resurrected Mind*
  - e. *Blessed are the Stigma Busters*
2. BeFriender presentation: This is a program at our church with trained lay members providing one-on-one support for those experiencing life challenges.
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).
4. Introduction to Meditation
5. Video: "A Father's and Son's Perspective on Mental Illness" by Alan Johnson

6. Review of Mental Health First Aid program recently hosted by church (see p.15)
7. Video: "My Love Affair with the Brain: The Life and Science of Dr. Marian Diamond"
8. 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 our church website:  
<http://www.firstchurchberkeley.org/news/mental-health-promotion-seminar-videos>  
The seminars cover the following topics:
  - a. Mental Health - What Is It and Why Should I Care?
  - b. Mental Illness
  - c. Emotional Literacy
  - d. Suicide (another resource is a book, "*The Lifesaving Church: Faith Communities and Suicide Prevention*" by UCC pastor Rachael Keefe. Published by Chalice Press, 2018.)
  - e. Mindfulness
9. Book review: "*The Day I Died: Brain Trauma and the Journey Back*" by Carole Petiet (a church member). Published by Archway Publishing, 2016.
10. Movie: Lars and the Real Girl (followed by discussion)
11. Mental health as portrayed in the movies and on TV
12. Emotional Support Animals: how they fit in with mental health care
13. Journey into Music



## 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 monthly (for 75 minutes) and is led by two facilitators. We have a group of facilitators, including clergy (those who work in settings outside the church, such as hospice; are in retirement; or are clergy on staff). We are fortunate to have these clergy in our church who are willing and able to serve as facilitators. Others who can serve as facilitators are those who have professional experience working with small groups, such as counselors and therapists.

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

1. Opening with prayer
2. Reading the **Guidelines** aloud (including the confidentiality statement) - see below.
3. Check-in: Everyone is invited to say a few sentences as a check-in.  
No one interrupts or does backtalk during this time. Anyone can pass.
4. The facilitators lead a general discussion and sharing time. 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.
5. Closing with 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.

We were fortunate to have a training by Rev. Craig Rennebohm on Companionship, giving 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 have a Companionship Team that will be serving as Sunday Companions, being present before, during and after worship to respond to "in-the-moment" mental health challenges. We are meeting regularly to practice the five practices of Companionship, 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 your schedule). This is an opportunity to highlight mental health in the public worship space, and is a way for a congregation to begin or to continue 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
- Suggested Hymns
- Liturgy
- Sermon idea 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 do to 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.



## 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).



## **Mental 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. They raise awareness and provide 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 your 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 receive the companionship that is offered. And as followers of Jesus, may we offer that companionship to those in need. Amen

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**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 has enriched our team. Our clergy liaison is always invited to these meetings.

We have monthly one-hour meetings, 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) Covenant was approved 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 two years of Mental Health Ministry activities, we are ready to take the steps to consider becoming a WISE Congregation for Mental Health. The WISE process was introduced during Mental Health Sunday, and volunteers were asked to join a “WISE Exploratory Group” to start the process. Over 25 people wanted to join this group, and three leaders emerged to lead the group.

Our WISE Exploratory Group will be:

- Reviewing the 10-step approach to becoming a WISE Congregation (see Mental Health Network website: [mhn-ucc.org](http://mhn-ucc.org))
- Writing a draft WISE Covenant
- Doing a presentation at Church Council including sharing our draft WISE Covenant
- Doing two all-church presentations and discussions:
  - a. “WISE: Sharing our Stories”
  - b. “WISE: Moving Forward in Discernment”
- Determining what other activities are needed based on congregational feedback
- Having a proposed congregation vote at our next Annual Meeting

While our church has done two years of Mental Health Ministry activities prior to exploring the WISE process, other churches may have different approaches to becoming WISE. There are many paths that churches can follow to become WISE.



## Living into our WISE Covenant

It has been helpful to weave our Mental Health Ministry activities and programs into the WISE Model, in anticipation of becoming a WISE Congregation for Mental Health. This helps in seeing our whole ministry, and is useful when we are describing our ministry to others.

Our ministry is organized into four Focus Areas: Welcome, Inclusion, Support and Engagement. Content of the focus areas will change over time. Future programming ideas will be considered as we move forward.

### Mental Health Ministry Focus Areas

- 1. Welcome - creating a welcoming environment for people with mental health challenges and their families:**
  - Welcoming people by name
  - Sunday Companionship Team
  
- 2. Inclusion - including people with mental health challenges in the life of the congregation and modeling that worship is a place where mental health will be included:**
  - Active inclusion of people with mental health challenges in the work of the Mental Health Ministry
  - Inclusive language from the pulpit
  - Mental Health Sunday (held yearly in May)
  - *LGBTQIAA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, allies): activities to be planned for access to resources and other issues to be determined.\**
  
- 3. Support - providing support for people with mental health challenges and their families**
  - Spiritual Support Group (sharing our stories in a faith-based safe space; meets monthly)
  - Linkage with BeFrienders via Sunday Companionship Team
  - Development of community Mental Health Resource list

**4. Engagement - providing outreach and educational opportunities both within our own congregation and in the community.**

- Mental Health Ministry Forum (speakers, book study, discussions, sermon reviews, etc. of an educational nature; meets monthly)
- Mental Health Promotion Seminars
- Linkage with others doing the same type of work (UCC Mental Health Network)
- *Interaction with community partners (other local churches, NAMI, local mental health clinics and other organizations)\**
- *Education and advocacy about current legislative issues regarding mental health\**

\* *Activities in italics are programming ideas to focus on in the future.*



## Moving Forward

Starting and growing a Mental Health Ministry is a collaborative effort, bringing together clergy and lay church members to envision our community as a place where all are welcome and all are included. We echo the welcome we hear each Sunday morning as worship begins:

...Welcome to people of all colors, all genders, all body shapes and sizes,  
all mental, physical and emotional abilities. Because you are here today,  
this body is whole and perfect.

Each church will have their own creative ideas in starting and growing a Mental Health Ministry. These ideas are the spark in moving forward.

