

A WISE welcome

June 29, 2015

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In an effort to energize UCC congregations to support mentally ill people in their midst, the 2015 General Synod overwhelmingly adopted a resolution Monday, June 29 to develop a network of churches that are welcoming, inclusive, supportive and engaged (WISE) for mental health.

The Rev. Alan Johnson of Boulder, Colo., drove the effort to bring the resolution before the delegates. He is the chair of the UCC Mental Health Network.

"It began with my son's first psychotic break down from bipolar disease 23 years ago, my own episode with depression and my brother's suicide," he said.

"The sound of silence about mental illness can be profound."

Building on General Synod action in 1995, the resolution encourages congregations to adopt WISE covenants, with support from the Mental Health Network, which will advocate for "all persons with mental illness who are falling through the fraying safety net."

A particularly poignant moment occurred during the debate on the resolution. Eric Kendall of the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference noted that the creation of WISE covenants would go a long way toward creating safe havens for mentally ill people. He then asked everyone who has been affected by mental illness to stand. The number who rose in silence in the plenary hall was mute testimony to the pervasiveness of the disease.

"Research shows that one in four Americans experience some form of mental illness in a given year, although the severity of the disorder can vary widely," according to the background information to the resolution. "One in 17 Americans lives with a serious and persistent mental illness.

"Many people living with mental illness are shunned, feared and discriminated against. As a result, many people with these illnesses don't seek treatment and they don't share their stories with others. Consequently, they are not included in the network of care our congregations normally extend to a member who is ill. They struggle through alone or with the help of a few close family members they trust to keep their illnesses secret."

Johnson said that the goal of the resolution is to encourage congregations to use the resources of the Mental Health Network (including a 12-step plan) to be designated as WISE churches, in the same way that churches become Open and Affirming congregations. "I would love to see 500 WISE congregations out of the 5,000 UCC churches."

Some of the WISE 12 steps involve mitigating the shame and stigma that mental illness engenders. One committee member noted, "As church, we are considered armies of compassion." With rapidly shrinking public services available, "churches are where those who suffer turn."

Johnson encouraged those interested in the issue of mental illness within the church to attend the Widening the Welcome conference Sept. 24-26 at the Marriott Hotel in Hartford, Conn. This conference seeks to help churches become welcoming communities for people who have been touched by mental illness or brain disorder. Further information is available at ucc.org/widening_the_welcome_2015_inclusion_for_all.