

1 The Board of Directors recommends this resolution be sent to a Committee of the General
2 Synod.

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4 **DEVELOPING WELCOMING, INCLUSIVE, SUPPORTIVE AND ENGAGED**
5 **CONGREGATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH**

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7 **Submitted by the United Church of Christ Disability Ministries**
8 **A Prudential Resolution**
9

10 **SUMMARY**

11
12 Profound and pervasive stigma surrounds people in our society who have mental illnesses (also
13 called brain disorders). Research shows that 1 in 4 Americans experience some form of mental
14 illness in a given year, although the severity of the disorder can vary widely. One in seventeen
15 Americans lives with a serious and persistent mental illness. Some of the more common mental
16 illnesses include schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive/compulsive disorder,
17 PTSD, panic/anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and substance abuse disorders.

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

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25 At the same time, those who do seek mental health services frequently may not be able to find
26 affordable and effective help. Our public mental health system, which for years served as a
27 safety net for those with the most serious brain disorders, is frayed to the breaking point. The
28 public mental health system is severely hampered by lack of funding. In almost every state, its
29 shortcomings include a dearth of crisis evaluation centers; insufficient psychiatric beds to serve
30 the number of patients needing hospitalization; the absence or inadequacy of mental health
31 services in prisons and jails; inadequate efforts to identify children who are experiencing mental
32 disorders and provide early intervention for them; and laws that prevent involuntary treatment
33 for people who are profoundly ill.

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35 Unfortunately, repairing our fragmented mental health systems and erasing stigma are not easy
36 tasks. Effective advocacy and affecting attitudinal change takes sustained effort by individuals
37 and by church communities.

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39 This resolution is aimed at urging local congregations to engage in conversation and education
40 about mental illness including addiction and trauma challenges. The resolution encourages
41 congregations to strengthen their efforts to be Welcoming, Inclusive and Supportive of
42 congregants with mental health challenges and their families and to Engage (WISE) with other
43 groups working in this arena. The intention is for congregations to decide to be designated WISE
44 Congregations for Mental Health. In addition, the resolution encourages congregations to address
45 the social issues of a fraying safety net for persons with serious brain disorders including persons
46 who are chronically homeless and persons who are incarcerated.

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HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL GROUNDING

Historically, the United Church of Christ has always been on the vanguard of speaking about and living out a deep concern for persons who have been marginalized by society. For many, the stigma and shame surrounding mental illness is even more difficult to overcome than battling the illness itself. An estimated 70 to 80 percent of people with diagnosable mental illnesses do not seek treatment because they fear they will be labeled and thus stigmatized and discriminated against. Yet mental illnesses are treatable, and treatment success rates exceed those for illnesses like heart disease and cancer.

One out of four people in our congregations and in our country will have a mental health challenge in any given year. This represents a large number of people who can benefit from a ministry of welcome, inclusion and support in their congregations. All congregants can engage in advocacy to reduce stigma and repair our broken mental health system. In Romans we read, “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.” This includes everyone. However, as in the parable of the Great Banquet, those who were invited with compassion to come in and sit at the table were those who were on the margins of society. They are the ones who are the good news people that Jesus embraces as he hosts the meal. And, he is also a guest since he became an outsider himself to the established political and religious systems of that day.

United Church of Christ congregations are called to be witnesses and embodiments of the Reign of God which Jesus came to proclaim, to live, and to which he invites us to participate. This Reign points to the hope and vision that all people, including those affected by mental illnesses, will live fully, will live peaceably with justice, and will love and be loved. Jesus came proclaiming that the “Kingdom of God has come near.” (Matthew 3:2) His life was the embodiment of that Kingdom, that Reign, into which everyone is invited.

Since 1993, in particular, the United Church of Christ has worked toward bringing attention to mental illnesses/brain disorders and encouraged us to engage in this ministry. Through the United Church of Christ, the United Church of Christ Mental Illness Network, which is now the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network, has supported this ministry. The United Church of Christ MHN includes individuals from United Church of Christ congregations across the country, some of whom have mental illnesses and some of whom are family members of those with mental illnesses.

In 1995, the General Synod passed the resolution: “Calling the People of God to Justice for Persons with Serious Mental Illnesses (Brain Disorders).” Twenty years later, we are still seeing and experiencing the fallout of the deinstitutionalization that took place decades ago of persons who were in state-run mental institutions and asylums. The promised funding for better community mental health care following the closures of state hospitals has not materialized. The scramble for services has left thousands of persons unserved and has precipitated a tragedy for those persons and their families who are unable to navigate the fractured mental health system.

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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94 The United Church of Christ MHN has its bylaws established and is in the process of becoming a
95 501c3 organization. It is in covenant relationship with the national setting of the United Church
96 of Christ and will link with the United Church of Christ through the implementing bodies so
97 named by the Officers of the Church. The mutual accountability will be through regular
98 connection between the United Church of Christ MHN and the liaison of the implementing
99 bodies. Funds will be sought through the implementing bodies of the United Church of Christ as
100 well as outside sources.

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102 Desired outcomes and possibility for social change:

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104 United Church of Christ congregations nationwide will become WISE Congregations for Mental
105 Health, and in the process, their members will develop greater compassion and offer greater
106 support for those with mental illnesses. Stigma will be reduced within the congregations, and
107 members will carry their enhanced awareness with them into the larger community and lead the
108 way to a more welcoming, inclusive, supportive and engaged society.

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110 As stigma diminishes, more people with mental illnesses will seek and accept treatment, and as
111 they do so, the population in our jails, which have become our nation's de facto mental hospitals,
112 will decrease. Our homeless population, with its high proportion of people suffering from
113 untreated mental illnesses, should also diminish. People with mental illnesses will feel less
114 isolated and shunned and will live longer, healthier and more-fulfilling lives.

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116 The potential for social change is vast. There are 5,100 United Church of Christ congregations,
117 each filled with caring individuals. If we raise awareness among these United Church of Christ
118 members and help them expand their compassion for people with mental illnesses and their
119 families, we will be sowing the seeds for a more just and loving world, as Jesus himself
120 demonstrated for us. Our members will be a vanguard, a beacon for their neighbors and
121 coworkers to follow.

122
123 As more awareness is brought to the brokenness of the mental health system, proposals for
124 appropriate funding and better policies will be brought to the legislative process.
125 Many congregations are already engaged in outreach to persons who are homeless, many of
126 whom are living with a mental illness and/or substance abuse issues. This includes providing
127 meals, shelters, centers for counseling and employment, and partnering with local agencies that
128 offer assistance.

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130 A resolution urging individual congregations to embrace a WISE covenant is a good approach,
131 because stigma can only be overcome at an individual level. Research has shown the most
132 effective way to reduce stigma is through personal contact with individuals who are considered
133 equals.

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135 Our congregations are strongly encouraged to break the silence on mental illness and be
136 witnesses and beacons for those who have become marginalized and stigmatized.

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138 Action steps: The well-defined steps for a congregation to become a WISE Congregation for
139 Mental Health include:

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141 The congregation engages in education, awareness, and study. The United Church of Christ
142 MHN has developed resources to help congregations raise awareness about mental health issues
143 and educate their members on a variety of mental health topics. These resources, available on the
144 United Church of Christ MHN website at www.mhn-ucc.blogspot.com, offer guidance for
145 congregations to create a more welcoming environment and engage in this ministry of inclusion
146 and support.

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148 The congregation affirms a mental health task force to oversee the process of increasing
149 awareness.

150
151 Growing out of the congregation's awareness, the team (with clergy and lay-leader input), writes
152 a WISE covenant. Bringing this covenant to the boards and committees of the congregation will
153 clarify the import and the impact of this covenant.

154
155 When the timing is right, the congregation can vote to become a WISE Congregation for Mental
156 Health.

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158 The congregation can choose to join or continue to be part of the United Church of Christ Mental
159 Health Network, where they will share experiences and resources with other WISE
160 congregations.

161
162 As congregations grow in awareness and compassion, they may feel called to address social
163 change at a local or state level. They will be able to recognize and address mental health
164 concerns around prisons and homelessness in their local contexts.

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166 Stakeholders: Clergy, staff, lay leaders and members of United Church of Christ congregations,
167 including those who have mental health challenges and their families, friends and acquaintances.
168 In other words, we are all stakeholders in this mission.

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170 Those most affected by the action are members and leaders of United Church of Christ
171 congregations. People in these categories have helped us formulate this resolution from its
172 earliest beginnings.

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174 Evaluation: United Church of Christ MHN will evaluate the impact of this resolution by
175 establishing and monitoring a set of simple metrics. These metrics may include such measures
176 as:

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178 How many congregations have a mental health ministry?
179 How many congregations hold a Mental Health Sunday at least once a year?
180 How many congregations have a spiritual support group for mental health?
181 How many congregations are actively involved in legislative advocacy?

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183 **INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY**

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185 Most United Church of Christ congregations will find they already have the institutional capacity
186 to execute the provisions of this resolution. With leadership from caring clergy and staff, a task
187 force of members who care about this topic can be formed. Because one in four members has a
188 mental health issue in any given year, the likelihood of finding members who care about the
189 topic is high. Clergy need to help create a safe and accepting atmosphere to improve the chance
190 that members will feel safe disclosing their relationship to mental illness.

191
192 The United Church of Christ MHN envisions a Covenant Group of persons who are active in
193 mental health issues in each of our United Church of Christ Conferences and who can highlight
194 the effective programs in their conference as well as disseminate the resources that are being
195 developed by the United Church of Christ MHN.

196
197 It is our judgment that the current situation urgently needs to change. We call upon the General
198 Synod to use its bold public voice and witness to call attention to the situation and adopt and
199 support this resolution. The success of this resolution is built on the assumption that the national
200 setting will provide network coordination. However, local and regional social change is
201 dependent upon conference and local church leadership involvement.

202
203 **TEXT OF RESOLUTION**

204
205 WHEREAS, most people believe that mental illnesses are rare and “happen to someone else,”
206 when in fact, mental illnesses are common and widespread with an estimated 61.5 million
207 Americans (1 in 4) experiencing some form of mental illness in a given year;

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209 WHEREAS, there continues to be strong stigma and discrimination in society against people
210 with these brain disorders in housing, employment, social relationships, (including how they are
211 treated in our churches);

212
213 WHEREAS, many uninformed people believe people with mental illnesses are likely to be
214 violent, while in reality, people with mental illnesses are more likely to be victims of violence
215 than perpetrators;

216
217 WHEREAS, the public mental health system, which previously served as a safety net for people
218 with the most severe mental illnesses, has suffered from dramatic funding cuts in the last decade,
219 and our prisons and county jails now house more people with mental illnesses than psychiatric
220 hospitals do;

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222 WHEREAS, faith and spirituality can be an important component of recovery from mental
223 illnesses and addictions;

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225 WHEREAS, a mental illness or brain disorder in the family affects not only the ill family
226 member, it profoundly affects other family members and loved ones and the entire family
227 structure;

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229 WHEREAS, people having a diagnosable brain disorder and/or substance abuse disorder are
230 potentially at a higher risk for suicide;

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232 WHEREAS, the church is called to be a community that breaks through fear and isolation to
233 offer love, hope, care and healing;

234
235 WHEREAS, Jesus showed us the way to reach out to those who are ill or marginalized to offer
236 companionship, compassion and support;

237
238 THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Thirtieth General Synod encourages United Church
239 of Christ congregations to adopt covenants to be WISE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive,
240 Engaged) Congregations for Mental Health and to offer support to family members and loved
241 ones of people with brain disorders.

242
243 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Thirtieth General Synod encourages congregations to
244 work to eradicate stigma around mental illnesses/brain disorders and advocate for better mental
245 health services for those who are falling through the fraying safety net, including those in prisons
246 and for persons who are homeless.

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248 **FUNDING**

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250 The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance with the
251 overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

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253 **IMPLEMENTATION**

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255 The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries and other entities of the
256 United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

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