



Partners in HEALTH *and* WHOLENESS

AN INITIATIVE OF THE
NORTH CAROLINA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

PHW Quarterly Newsletter: June 2, 2026



From Isolation to Belonging: How One Church is Supporting Rural Seniors

At Mt. Hope United Church of Christ in Whitsett, N.C., leaders began noticing a painful pattern: older adults in their congregation were quietly disappearing from community life. Some could no longer drive. Others were homebound due to physical or mental health challenges. Many were experiencing loneliness, grief, depression, anxiety, or spiritual disconnection. In rural communities, losing the ability to drive can also mean losing access to worship, friendship, support, and even basic needs like fresh food.

The church also identified the heartbreaking statistics that illuminate this need: the suicide rate for rural residents is 1.2 times higher than for urban residents and the highest

suicide rate in rural NC is among those 85 and older, reaching 26.5 per 100,000 people.

But rather than asking, “*How do we create another program?*” Mt. Hope asked a deeper question: How do we help people know they still belong?

Through the Abundant Life Cohort, Mt. Hope United Church of Christ received a \$5,000 grant to help transform that question into action — creating new ways to reconnect isolated seniors to worship, friendship, mental health support, and community life.

That question became the heart of their Abundant Life project: **Hope Connection: You Belong.**

What They’re Doing

- Creating a “Hope Connection” church bus ministry where older adults are personally picked up, welcomed onto the bus by a driver and volunteer aide, offered a light snack and drink for the ride, and brought back into spaces of worship, friendship, support, and belonging
- Hosting “Puddle Clubs” — supportive gatherings inspired by the image of butterflies gathering together for nourishment, connection, and renewal
- Creating “Choose Happiness” Mental Wellness Support Boxes for homebound seniors, filled with coping tools, reflection resources, activities, encouragement, and mental health supports
- Offering fresh food and nutritional support alongside relationship-building and spiritual care
- Partnering with organizations like National Alliance on Mental Illness to reduce stigma and increase mental health awareness

Their project is rooted in one simple but powerful message: **You are not forgotten. You are not alone. You belong.**



[Next Abundant Life Cohort Launching This September](#)

The North Carolina Council of Churches is excited to launch the third Abundant Life Cohort this September through our Partners in Health and Wholeness initiative.

Participating congregations receive guidance and support throughout the process, along with a grant of up to \$5,000 to implement a year-long project. Some churches focus on reducing stigma around mental health, while others create support groups, host educational events, strengthen community partnerships, or expand care ministries.

Whether your congregation is just beginning these conversations or looking to deepen existing work, the cohort is designed to meet communities where they are and help them take the next faithful step.

Applications open July 1 and close August 24, with the cohort launching in September. Stay tuned for the application link and additional details.

[More about Abundant Life](#)

Upcoming Events

[Evaluation 101 Webinar: Measuring and Communicating Your Impact](#)

Tuesday, June 9, 6 - 8 p.m.

Online

This webinar led by Resourceful Communities is designed to help congregations think practically and creatively about evaluation, storytelling, and reporting. Whether you are

leading a support group, hosting educational events, building partnerships, or implementing a larger behavioral health initiative, this session will offer simple and manageable tools for tracking progress and sharing your impact.

Participants will explore:

- How to measure impact in meaningful and manageable ways
- Collecting stories, outcomes, and feedback
- Tracking participation and engagement
- Preparing for mid-year and final reporting requirements
- Communicating your work to funders, partners, and your congregation

This webinar is especially designed for churches participating in the Abundant Life Cohort, but is open to anyone interested in strengthening their ability to evaluate and communicate the impact of their ministry and community work.

[Register Now](#)

Love Boldly
Serve Joyfully
Lead Courageously



Connect with Us!

If you're attending the upcoming Annual Conferences of the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Conferences of the United Methodist Church, we'd love for you to stop by and see us.

Come learn more about the Council's work, including our Abundant Life Cohort, a growing initiative supporting congregations as they deepen their work in mental and behavioral health and become a hub of healing, resilience, and justice.

Whether you're curious about getting involved, looking for resources, or simply want to connect, we're excited to meet you.

Wellness Spotlight

Protecting Brain Health Through Healthy Living

by Arlecia Simmons, PHW Associate Director, Eastern NC

By now, you may have heard or read dementia being referred to as diabetes type 3. While diet and exercise are often associated with preventing type 2 diabetes, it's also important to support brain health. Although researchers debate the connection between Alzheimer's disease and type 2 diabetes, research does support that poorly controlled blood sugar may increase the risk of developing Alzheimer's. No matter your age or diagnosis, exercise and a healthy diet are recommended to promote healthy aging.

It's important to note that according to the Alzheimer's Association, "Dementia is not a single disease, but rather an umbrella term for a collection of symptoms caused by various underlying neurocognitive diseases." Common diseases included under the umbrella are Alzheimer's Disease, which account for 60% to 80% of dementia cases. Additionally, Vascular Dementia, Lewy Body Dementia, and Frontotemporal Dementia are under the umbrella.

During a recent Healthy Aging and Beyond Conference sponsored by Southern Regional AHEC, presenters discussed how to see brain health as a part of holistic health. Thus, brain health isn't something to just think about when you're retirement age. There are actually modifiable risk factors that exist across the lifespan.

While there is a normal age-related cognitive decline, where learning may slow down as dopamine and serotonin levels decrease, some may begin to notice additional changes that may need the attention of your healthcare provider. Because physicians don't have the time to discuss brain health during visits to manage other chronic conditions, it's important that you make appointments to discuss brain health or cognitive changes you may have noticed in yourself or a loved one. Go to these appointments prepared with a list of noted changes and questions for your healthcare provider.

More to Explore



An Introduction to PHW's Newest Intern

Hello everyone! My name is Maliya Simmons-Marshall, and I am excited to join the team as a Behavioral Health Equity & Communications Practicum Student. I graduated from Lenoir-Rhyne University in 2024 with a Bachelor of Science in Biology and a minor in Community Health. Additionally, I am currently pursuing my Master of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where my concentration is Leadership in Practice, and I am expected to graduate in 2027.

My passion for public health is rooted in my interests in health equity, social justice, and improving access to care for underserved communities. Through my academic, leadership, and healthcare experiences, I have developed a strong interest in behavioral health and the importance of addressing mental health stigma, particularly within communities where these conversations are often overlooked. Additionally, I am very excited to engage with work connected to the UNC Public Health and Faith Communities Initiative, and the growing focus on partnerships between public health and faith communities. I value the initiative's emphasis on community engagement, inclusive health practices, and strengthening connections between public health professionals and faith-based organizations to advance health equity across North Carolina. To learn more about this initiative, [click here](#).

During this practicum experience, I look forward to expanding my knowledge in community engagement, health communication, and advocacy. I am excited to contribute to initiatives that support equitable mental health resources and awareness. I am grateful for this opportunity and look forward to learning, collaborating, and growing throughout this experience.

Art, Healing, and Suicide Prevention in Community



The Expression Tunnel Initiative was created through the Five-Year Black Youth Suicide Prevention Plan as a community-centered art installation designed to foster healing and honest conversations about Black youth mental health and suicide prevention. Inspired by an installation at North Carolina State University, Dr. Rodney Harris and Victor L. Jones partnered with community members to build a portable exhibit that later expanded into public programming at the Imperial Centre for the Arts and Sciences. The initiative also trained more than 50 barbers and community members in suicide prevention and distributed gun locks and Narcan through trusted community spaces.

At the April 16th Faith and Mental Health Summit hosted by the North Carolina Council of Churches in Rocky Mount, participants created and painted tiles with messages intended to promote positive mental health and inspire others; these tiles were later added to the Expression Tunnel exhibit at the Imperial Centre for the Arts and Sciences.

Guest Contribution



Summer Check-in Support Youth Mental Health

Guest Contributor:

Isley Cotton, MSW, MDiv

Youth Suicide Prevention Coordinator

North Carolina Division of Public Health, [Injury and Violence Prevention Branch](#)

[NC Department of Health and Human Services](#)

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Summer can be a time of rest and fun—but it can also bring less structure, fewer daily check-ins, and more time alone or online for young people. For parents, caregivers, and faith leaders, it's an important season to stay connected and attentive.

Guidance from National Alliance on Mental Illness ([National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#)), Suicide Prevention Resource Center ([Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)), and American Foundation for Suicide Prevention ([Home | AFSP](#)) highlights that changes in routine, increased isolation, and more screen time can raise the risk of loneliness, anxiety, or depression.

What to watch for:

Notice shifts like withdrawal from loved ones, changes in sleep, irritability, loss of interest in activities, risky behavior, or talking about feeling hopeless, like a burden, or wanting to disappear. Take all mentions of self-harm seriously.

How to support:

Keep some routine, even if it's flexible. Stay connected through simple, consistent check-ins—during meals, car rides, or quiet moments. Be aware of online activity and encourage safe, in-person connections like camps, youth groups, or community programs. Most importantly, trust your instincts—if something feels off, gently lean in.

Faith and community matter:

Faith leaders can create safe spaces, share messages of hope, and check in with youth who may be less visible during summer months.

Start the conversation:

You don't need perfect words—just presence. Try asking, "How are you really doing?" or "What's been on your mind lately?" Listen without judgment.

If a young person shares thoughts of suicide, stay calm, take them seriously, and seek help right away. Support is available 24/7 through the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline—call or text **988**. A little extra attention this summer can make a life-saving difference.

[Click here to view article references and resources.](#)

From Our Friends

[Free Mental Health First Aid Training](#)

Monday, June 29 - Tuesday, June 30

Public Library of Johnston County and Smithfield

[305 E Market St, Smithfield](#)

Mental Health First Aid for Adults teaches people how to recognize signs of mental health or substance use challenges, how to offer and provide initial help, and how to guide a person toward appropriate care if necessary. Topics covered include anxiety, depression, psychosis, and addictions. This class offered by Poe Center for Health Education is split into two days, June 29 and 30. Participants must attend both sessions to be certified. [Sign up today to reserve your spot.](#)

[2026 Tribal Health Summit - "Our Food, Our Land, Our Health"](#)

Thursday, July 23 - Friday July 24, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Oscar N. Harris Student Union, Buies Creek

[459 Leslie Campbell Ave, Buies Creek](#)

Join Blue Cross NC to their second annual Tribal Health Summit where Native and non-Native partners, leaders, individuals and organizations will come together on their shared interest of improving the health of NC American Indian populations. Guided by the theme *Our Food, Our Land, Our Health*, this two-day will explore the deep connections between food sovereignty, land stewardship, and holistic health and how reconnecting

with traditional food systems and caring for the land strengthens physical, mental, spiritual, and community health as an interconnected whole. [Click here](#) to register.

[Creating an Unbroken Circle of Care in Your Faith Community](#)

Transitions LifeCare is offering a four-part training series to help faith communities strengthen their care for members who are aging, seriously ill, dying, or grieving. Grounded in *The Unbroken Circle: A Toolkit for Congregations Around Illness, End of Life, and Grief*, this program equips clergy, lay leaders, and congregational teams with practical tools to build ongoing, community-based systems of care.

Across four in-person sessions, participants will learn new approaches to congregational care, explore resources and strategies, and develop a tailored action plan to implement within their own community. Each participant will leave with concrete next steps and coaching support to help sustain their work. The program takes place at Transitions LifeCare in Raleigh, NC from September 2026 through February 2027. Teams must attend all four sessions, and a limited number of teams will be selected. A \$100 fee is requested upon acceptance, with no team turned away for financial reasons. [Learn more](#) about the program. [Click here](#) to apply to the program.

[Babies Need Bottoms](#)

Babies Need Bottoms is a nonprofit diaper bank serving Western North Carolina. Working through a network of 80+ community partners covering the 18 counties of this region, they distribute diapers, wipes and other infant care items monthly for families struggling to afford the basics. Because diapers are expensive and essential and not covered by any Federal or state assistance programs, their diaper bank is a grass roots response to community need, so children can be clean, dry and healthy. Learn more about their work and how to get involved: babiesneedbottoms.org.

Submit an Event

Hosting a mental health event in North Carolina that you'd like to share with others?

Submit it for consideration in our quarterly newsletter by [clicking here](#).

Reach Out to Us!

Want to learn more or get involved? Reach out to our Partners in Health & Wholeness team. We'd love to connect, answer your questions, and explore ways to support your work in faith, mental health, and well-being.

- Carrilea Hall, Senior Associate Director, Western NC | carrilea@ncchurches.org
- Arlecia Simmons, Associate Director, Eastern NC | arlecia@ncchurches.org
- Meredith Rawls, Northeast Regional Coordinator | meredith@ncchurches.org

- Donna Parks Hill, Community Health Associate Director | donna@ncchurches.org

For questions about Opioid Workshops or work in harm reduction, contact Donna Parks Hill.

{{Disclaimer}}

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