

WV Presbytery Builds a Bridge!

Just imagine...every time you want to leave your home and get groceries, go to school, visit a friend or go to the emergency room, you need to crawl down a muddy bank, cross a shallow 10-foot wide stream and climb up the other bank. Every time it rains, the creek is impassible for hours or even days. The only other option is to walk through the woods, through the neighbor's property along the edge of the mountain and cross on a wobbly bridge. This is the daily dilemma for hundreds of families in our state.

In 2015, a series of devastating floods occurred in the state and caused more than 600 private bridges to be significantly damaged or destroyed. Half of those bridges belonged to families who had no resources to repair or rebuild the bridges that gave them access to their homes and neighborhoods. Due to earlier flooding, many were still carrying loans from previous rebuilding needs.



It costs approximately \$25,000 to build a small residential bridge in WV. No insurance carrier in the state will insure a private bridge, so the cost to rebuild or repair is the sole responsibility of the homeowner. This was and is a significant problem for the owners of those 300 bridges. So WVVOAD (WV Voluntary Organizations Assisting in Disaster), a roundtable of churches, non-profits and governmental agencies, gathered to discuss the problem. The Presbytery of WV was a part of the discussion. No state VOAD had ever built a bridge large enough for vehicle traffic, yet that is what the people of WV needed WVVOAD to do.

The Mennonites had been building walking bridges, and they offered to check if their insurance would cover the building of larger bridges. When their insurance denied their request, they discussed the issue, dropped their carrier and found one that would insure them. Several agencies worked with floodplain managers, county officials and the families to make sure paperwork, permits and documentation was fully completed and prepared. Another group worked to sort through the 300 recorded needs and lift out 10 sites for our first set of bridges. Another group worked on funding and sponsorship.



The WVOAD bridge committee needed to make some significant decisions. How would we decide who got the first bridges? How big should the bridges be? What design would we use? What did we realistically need to cover the cost of one bridge? The committee chose a quantifiable criteria for ordering the builds. Then, after consulting with emergency services in several counties, they decided the bridges needed to be strong enough to carry the load of the largest ambulance in the county but not the fire trucks. The fire departments explained that they do not drive across private bridges as they often have



nowhere to turn around on the other side. Those decisions helped make the cost clear. The average bridge estimate was set at \$15,000-\$18,000 with the use of volunteer labor. We needed about \$5 million to cover the cost of all 300 bridges.

The Mennonites offered the services of Johann Zimmerman with JZ Engineering of Harrisonburg, VA. Johann designed 7 different bridges that could be modified for different settings, and by December 2015, our first two bridges were built. The Presbytery of WV and the Ohio Conference of the UCC purchased and stocked a tool trailer for the project.



On the night before bridge number 10 was to receive a final inspection in the morning, the home owner had a medical emergency. The ambulance arrived quickly, crossed the new bridge and got him to the hospital in time to save his life. If there had been no bridge, the home owner would have needed to be strapped on to the back of an ATV for a drive, over the mountain and through a neighboring property. It would have taken at least 45 minutes longer to get him to the hospital and it is likely he would not have survived.

By June 2016, 17 bridges had been completed. Then massive flooding occurred in late June of 2016 and the bridge need increased with almost 200 more bridges needing repair or replacement. The good news is that the 17 bridges WVOAD built weathered the storm without damage!

Currently the total number of complete bridges stands at 29. The fundraising goal is 7.5 million. Bridge number 28 was built by funding from the Presbytery of WV. The ribbon was cut on April 6. We are excited to be a part of this important project. If you would like to help, please contact the Presbytery of WV office.