

Flood Update: WV VOAD bridge project completes 35th bridge

Two years ago, there was a flood in Mingo County. For 14 families on Elmer Brown Drive in Delbarton, it was a day that changed everything. The flood waters cut into the hill under the bridge they relied on, and the side of the state road caved in, causing the structure of the bridge to fall 3 feet, twisting the metal and making the bridge unpassable.

The families were cut off from direct access to schools, medical help and easy access to supplies. As the water receded, they found paths to get in and out. But hauling groceries down a railroad track, across a stream, up a bank and a mile down a gravel road by wheelbarrow is a bit more labor intensive than driving home in a car.

None of the 14 families had the resources to rebuild the bridge, and it was not a state-owned bridge.

Three months later, I heard about the people of Elmer Brown Drive in a meeting of WV VOAD (West Virginia Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster). WV VOAD is a table around which state agencies, national organizations, state religious organizations and others gather to share resources and tasks to address the issues arising from natural and human-made disasters.

That morning, we heard that more than 600 private bridges had been damaged or destroyed in West Virginia by the recent floods and that approximately 300 bridge owners had no resources to repair or rebuild their bridges. Some home owners had already replaced their bridges and were paying on loans for those replaced bridges when the flood washed them out again. With pervasive poverty, many on fixed incomes and multiple generations living in the homes, there was a critical need for bridges.

So a small committee was formed to begin to explore how this might be addressed.

In the bridge committee, we struggled. No volunteer agency in the US had ever build more that walking bridges. We needed bridges that could carry vehicles. My Mennonite pal, Rodney Burkholder, kept rubbing his chin and shaking his head all through the meeting. He finally said, "Well, we checked with our insurance company, and they said they would not insure us if we build anything other than walking bridges. I just don't think this is possible."





Frankly, we all agreed. But something had to be done, and we were the only ones who could.

There was laughter, but it tasted sad and bitter.

We scheduled another meeting in two weeks.

When I sat

down next to Rodney, he seemed to be leaning in to the conversation in a new way. As soon as the meeting started, he announced, "We have decided to change insurance carriers. We have found a company that will insure us."

I laughed. This time with hope.

We began work in earnest, starting with a pilot project of 20 bridges, Mennonite architect and engineer Johann Zimmerman working for free and piles of legal paperwork to begin sorting out. We set a high standard for the bridges – they had to be able to carry the weight of the heaviest ambulance in the county plus 10 percent.

Bridge building began a year and a half ago, and on June 13, we opened bridge #35 at Elmer Brown Drive. It was our largest project to date – 105 feet long when you add in the state's 9-foot portion. When we did the first cost estimate, it was \$400,000, but with our volunteers, the final cost was a much slimmer \$71,000.

At the dedication of the Elmer Brown Bridge, the 14 families gathered to pray, celebrate and thank God for promises made and kept. It had been two years almost to the day since their world changed. There was much laughter, some tears and great applause, and the whole community drove in parade across the bridge.

They will remember those two years without a bridge – the hard work of daily life, the family member who died because the ambulance could not get there in time and the fear that no one would help. But they will also remember the people who cared, made a way where there was no way, kept working in the face of so many naysayers, shoveled, hammered, poured concrete and prayed together to make a bridge arise.

God is wonderful and so very strange.

I hugged my Mennonite pal, Rodney, on that bridge and said, "So how long is the next bridge?"

He shook his head in wonder and consternation and then replied, "I think we need to figure out this new thing God is doing. We need to think about this some more."

"You mean the whole 'bridge ministry' for the Mennonites?"

"Yup. I am not sure where it is going."

I laughed. "You are going with God. God asked you to step out, and you did. This is what happened, and I am delighted."

"Harumph. We will see."

Rodney is a bit of an Eeyore, but he is always faithful to the voice of God. If you give him a day to think, he always solved the problem. He is a wonderful, loving example of what it can mean to be a disciple of Christ.

There is still much to do. Including the great flood of a year ago and the latest flooding, we have a total of 420 bridges that need our help. We need about \$6 million to complete those bridges with the help of volunteers.

The sound of that makes me laugh. It seems like an impossible dream. But God is a master at making the impossible happen. God chooses to use Rodneys, and Barbaras and Debras and Tims and Sarahs and Abrahams and Marys and Josephs to fulfill the promises made to the people of God.

The Presbyterians are a part of that process, working to build bridges where there was no way. Join in the laughter. Contact Barbara Chalfant at the Presbytery of WV by phone at 304-744-7634 or by email at missions@wvpresbytery.org

