



Brethren Disaster Ministries **BRIDGES**

Rebuilding Homes • Nurturing Children • Responding Globally

Vol. 26, Winter 2025

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 is a program of the Church of the Brethren


Children's Disaster Services
 is a program of Brethren Disaster Ministries

For more information on Brethren Disaster Ministries
 1-800-451-4407
 www.brethren.org/bdm



Church of the Brethren

California Wildfires: Responding to Short and Long-term Needs

The 2025 California wildfire season took the new year by surprise when five fires broke out on January 7, with five additional fires added within days. The two largest fires, Palisades and Eaton, fueled by strong Santa Ana winds, grew quickly and were not contained until January 31, after burning 23,707 and 14,201 acres respectively, in the Pacific Palisades, Altadena, and Pasadena communities. These two fires alone destroyed 16,251 structures, damaged another 2,046, and caused 29 deaths. Residents of a large swath of the area north/northwest of Los Angeles were under various evacuation orders, affecting

close to 200,000 at one point.

As Brethren Disaster Ministries' (BDM) program of first response, Children's Disaster Services (CDS) responded to the needs of children whose families were evacuated from and/or survived the fires. A total of 25 volunteers served in four different CDS teams, with the first teams arriving just a week after the fires began. These dedicated volunteers cared for 515 children in a little over four weeks. For further information about CDS' response in California, see the article on page 5.

In addition to sending CDS teams, BDM immediately began monitoring the
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Invaded and Occupied: DR Congo Churches Receive Aid

On Jan. 27, 2025, M23, a well-armed rebel group, invaded the city of Goma, the capital city of about two million residents of the North Kivu Province in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo/DRC). M23 is widely accepted to

be supported with funds, arms, and troops from neighboring Rwanda, although Rwanda denies involvement. Estimates are that more than 3,000 people died, and thousands were injured during the advance to and takeover of Goma. As of mid-February 2025, M23 had consolidated control over Goma, nearby mineral-rich areas, and the surrounding supply lines, and had also taken over Bukavu, the capital city of the South Kivu Province. M23 declared that it

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*Congolese children displaced by violence received school kits and uniforms to enable them to attend school locally (October 2024).
 Photo courtesy of Eglise des Freres au Congo*

California Wildfires

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effects of the fires and the needs of survivors by contacting fellow National VOAD (Volunteer Agencies Active in Disaster) members; participating in calls and receiving updates from California VOAD (CAL VOAD) and its Los Angeles unit, the Emergency Network Los Angeles (ENLA), as well as local emergency managers. Importantly, BDM also reached out to Russ Matteson, district executive of the Pacific Southwest District (PSWD) of the Church of the Brethren, and district disaster coordinators (DDCs) Lois and Lindy Frantz. These efforts helped to keep BDM informed of the situation on the ground as it discerned how best to be engaged during both the short and the long-term response.

PSWD's Matteson shared the initial news that the parsonage of the Church of the Brethren Conexion Pasadena congregation was destroyed in the first days of the Eaton fire. Fortunately, Pastors Juan Pablo Plaza and Adriana Rios and their children were traveling at the time, so no one was injured. The church, located some miles away, did not have fire damage but a window that broke allowed smoke and soot to enter the church building. The Church of the Brethren building is also home to the Pasadena Mennonite Church, another non-denominational congregation, and a school. The process of cleaning and

restoring began at the end of January with plans to return to worship in the building in mid-February.

The district established a fund to support the pastors and other members affected by the fires in some way, such as fire damage, impact on livelihoods, and other ripple effects. BDM continues to discuss how Emergency Disaster Fund (EDF) grants might assist the district and its churches with relief and recovery.

CAL VOAD opened a seven-day Wildfire Resource Hub for wildfire survivors on January 27, providing a unique opportunity for local and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including faith-based organizations, to extend assistance as a complement to the efforts of FEMA and other federal and state agencies. A multitude of services, supplies, and support were on offer for free, from financial aid, massage therapy, and new eyeglasses, to hot meals, groceries, and prescriptions. Long-time BDM partner Church World Service (CWS) played a key leadership role in the



Entrance to the Wildfire Resource Hub where non-profit organizations provided essential services for survivors.
Photo courtesy of CWS

Hub. One of the CDS volunteer teams provided a safe environment for children while their families focused on receiving resources and support.

Shifting to long-term recovery after a wildfire involves a massive effort to rebuild the devastated areas. This is particularly complicated in California, partly due to rising costs and regulations aimed at building back stronger to withstand the next fire or other disaster. Matteson and the BDM staff have been in close communication with local and national representatives of Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), whose rebuilding program, which is similar to BDM's, meets the requirements needed to work in California. PSWD members, under the coordination of the DDCs, have already served periodically on MDS projects in response to other fires in the state. BDM and district leadership will continue to communicate with MDS to learn of opportunities to partner

with them, including possibly sending volunteers to serve with them. Given the scale of the disaster that may be at least nine months or more away.



Photo taken by CDS volunteer of the area burned in 2025
California wildfires
Photo by Wendy Russell

DR Congo

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would continue marching until it reached the capital city of Kinshasa. Goma and Bukavu are the two largest cities in Eastern DR Congo. A majority of the Eglise des Freres au Congo (Church of the Brethren in DR Congo) churches are located in South Kivu. The situation was still changing as this BRIDGES went to print.

The Goma occupation has been devastating to the Brethren members of Goma Center church and the recently planted Magunga church, located just outside the city near the camps for displaced people. Many church members have sheltered with host families in Goma. During the first chaotic days there was no electricity, markets and services were closed, and leaving one's home for necessities such as water or food was extremely dangerous. Once the fighting subsided, the situation remained precarious and tense, with uncertainty as to who was responsible for authority in the city. While there has been no reported loss of life among the Brethren, there is limited access to food and water, partly due to the looting and destruction during the chaos of the first few days. Bukavu also experienced looting after M23 took over that city.

The current situation is part of a long history of violence by various militia and rebel groups in the eastern part of the country. M23 took over Goma briefly in 2012. Its latest resurgence began in early 2022 in the areas north of Goma, resulting in the displacement of millions of people, with up to one million fleeing to the areas around Goma. Some lived in official Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps while many lived in desperate makeshift camps on vacant land.

As soon as the displaced began appearing outside of Goma in May 2022, the Congolese Brethren committed to providing them with whatever assistance they could manage. From 2022 to 2024, in partnership with Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM), the Congolese

church received seven EDF grants totaling \$221,500 to support humanitarian aid programs for carefully selected beneficiaries, concentrating on the most vulnerable, including households headed by women, youth, and the elderly; people with disabilities; orphans, young children, and school children; and pregnant women. (see previous issues of BRIDGES for more background)

An additional 400,000 displaced people sought shelter and aid in Goma as fighting increased in early 2025. Since then some areas where IDPs settled or squatted have been damaged or closed, with M23 telling the people to go "home", although many of the homes from which they fled have been destroyed. The complex situation that existed before the invasion has become even more desperate and complicated.

BDM staff have remained in contact, as much as possible, with the Congolese church leaders throughout the crisis. Relief planning for 2025 that had begun prior to the takeover of Goma pivoted to an EDF grant of \$30,000 to provide emergency aid to families in the town who have few resources to obtain food and water. Church leaders are distributing aid in small amounts to the most vulnerable church members and their neighbors, using care to avoid calling attention to the activities due to competition for scarce commodities and the possible



*The Congolese church organized many distributions to help the most vulnerable people displaced by fighting in the Eastern Province. (April 2024)
Photo courtesy of Eglise des Freres au Congo*

presence of armed rebels, former soldiers, and criminals. Planning for an expanded and ongoing relief program continues between BDM and Congolese church leaders.

Breaking news—new EDF grants:

- \$20,000 to the Congolese church for food aid in South Kivu
- \$15,000 to the Church of the Brethren Burundi for aid for Congolese refugees

Rwanda

During the takeover of Goma, the fighting spilled across the nearby border with Rwanda, with artillery killing two members of the Rwanda Church of the Brethren and damaging homes. A special offering by Rwandan Church members provided food, supplies, and cash assistance to these families. Church leaders created a relief committee that identified 11 households with severely damaged homes belonging to "poverty stricken and vulnerable households" and/or families which lost loved ones, including several church members. An \$8,600 EDF grant is providing building materials and labor to repair or rebuild these homes.

BRIDGES is available by Email!

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Global Updates

Conflict in the Middle East: Building Dignity and Hope

Since the attack on an Israeli community by Hamas militants in October 2023, and the war that followed, four Emergency Disaster Fund (EDF) grants totaling \$115,000 have supported the most vulnerable people impacted by the conflict in Gaza, Lebanon, Israel, and the West Bank. As of mid-February, the Jan. 19, 2025, ceasefire has offered some hope that the war may end. More than 50,000 people have been killed in the region—Israeli, Palestinian (94 percent of the deaths), and Lebanese—and there has been catastrophic building and infrastructure damage in Gaza. EDF grants to partners in the area were carefully considered while BDM staff worked on a response plan that matched the interest and support of church members in the US.

In October 2024, a \$35,000 grant to Lebanese Society for Education and Social Development (LSESD), a trusted long-term partner, provided support for families displaced from southern Lebanon by the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. By October 2024, the conflict had displaced more than 100,000 in Lebanon. The grant provided food, hygiene supplies, mattresses, and blankets for 500 displaced families (2,000 people).

In November 2024, two grants supported Palestinian families, including Christians. The first was a \$25,000 grant to The Palestinian Conflict Transformation Center (Wi'am) to support specialized care for children in Gaza and the West Bank impacted by the war. Children are often the silent victims of conflict, enduring a war they cannot escape. The program includes providing safe spaces, psychosocial support, trauma-informed care, and community engagement, all of which are shown to help reduce the long-term impact of trauma in children. These services are combined with food aid and other Wi'am programs to provide a comprehensive response.

The second grant for \$25,000 was to The Shepherd Society to provide relief programming for displaced Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The Shepherd Society is the humanitarian outreach arm of Bethlehem Bible College, a Christian college located in the West Bank. This grant supports a larger program that includes emergency food distributions, the repairing and equipping of a medical clinic in Gaza, cold weather supplies such as blankets and coats, and a trauma counseling training program.

A January 2025 grant of \$30,000 is supporting a program for children in Gaza by International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC). As part of a larger comprehensive program, these funds will support a project that aims to mitigate the adverse effects of continuous exposure to violence, loss, and displacement experienced by children in Gaza. It integrates protection programs, psychosocial and physical support, and recreational activities to provide children, half of whom have disabilities, with the necessary support and assistance to help them cope with traumatic experiences and regain a sense of security and well-being.

BDM is also in discussion with other partners regarding the rebuilding of Gaza with a focus on medical clinics, schools, and shelter. If the ceasefire holds, additional grants supporting rebuilding are possible.

Nigeria Crisis Response Update

Planning for the 2025 joint response of the US Church of the Brethren and Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) was finalized during Roy Winter's November 2024 visit to the EYN headquarters in Kwarhi, Nigeria. This was the first in-person meeting between Winter and the new EYN leaders, including Daniel



The Shepherd Society supports food distributions to vulnerable families in Gaza affected by the conflict.
Photo courtesy of The Shepherd Society

Mbaya (president), Nuhu Mutah Abba (vice president), James K. Musa (general secretary), and Bitrus Duwara (director of Disaster Relief Management/DRM). The time of meeting and fellowship with EYN leadership and the leadership of Kulp Theological Seminary was a wonderful reminder of the hospitality that EYN shared even before the current crisis.

Roy spent a significant amount of time with Bitrus and the DRM team to finalize the Nigeria Crisis Response program priorities for 2025 which include agriculture, education for children, food distributions, and clean water projects. A challenging issue is the high number of people who remain displaced from their homes due to ongoing violence. These families often need help with food and livelihoods to survive, which limits the funding available to repair homes and resettle families in safer areas. DRM is working on identifying funding sources to enable the continuation of the crisis response after Church of the Brethren funding concludes at the end of 2026.



Roy Winter meeting with the EYN Disaster Response Management team in Kwarhi, Nigeria, November 2024

Photo courtesy of BDM

CDS Volunteers Bring Comfort and Hope in California

How can one describe the importance of bringing comfort and hope by giving caring support to others during times of crises? Children's Disaster Services (CDS) volunteers answer that question by sharing their experiences.

While working at the disaster recovery center, providing a space for children whose families had been affected by the [wildfire], I came across a couple with two young boys, one of whom was visibly upset and crying. When I told them we could take the boys to our play area while they took care of what they needed to do, the mother looked dubious and told me that one of them had autism and had a tendency to elope. I assured her that I was a retired special education teacher and had experience with children with autism. They brought the kids to our area. The boy with autism took a little while to settle in but soon both boys were playing happily with play dough and Magna-Tiles. When the parents came back, they told me they had been watching through the window and were happy to see him playing. They thanked us and said that they had been about to call the grandparents to come and get the boys because they had realized they wouldn't be able to get anything done if the boys were with them. I said it must be hard to go through all of these changes with a child who needs his routine, and she talked a little about how hard it had been. – Andi Kuenning



Laughter is healing! CDS volunteer Don Pohlman and children during the 2025 California wildfire response.

Photo by Melodie Bernhard

These children and their grateful parents were among many served by four CDS teams, totaling 25 volunteers, who served in Los Angeles during the weeks when wildfires, especially the Palisades and Eaton fires which began on Jan. 7, 2025, engulfed the area. Two teams of seven volunteers began service on January 14 and 15, respectively. Upon their arrival at Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) opened by the Red Cross and FEMA, the volunteers set up centers to care for children, equipped with "Kits of Comfort" which include toys and art supplies carefully chosen to encourage creative play—a key tool in helping children process trauma.

A third CDS team, consisting of volunteers from the Los Angeles area and northern California, arrived on January 27 to serve for a week at the Wildfire Resource Hub in Pasadena, organized by the California VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) to serve families affected by the fires with supplies, services, and a place to relax away from the chaos of the disaster. CDS cared for the children while their parents/guardians sought assistance. The fourth and final team of volunteers arrived on January 30 and set up in a DRC in Altadena, one of the hardest hit areas.

Due to the scale and complexity of service needs during this disaster situation, CDS teams had to remain flexible. Several times during their period of service, teams were asked to

switch between service locations, covering care for children across centers in six locations in Pasadena, Los Angeles, and Altadena. CDS associate director Carolyn Neher visited with each team, helping to coordinate their response.



CDS volunteer Andi Kuenning playing Magna-Tiles with a child during the California wildfire response.

Photo by Kathie Shaffer

CDS volunteers cared for 515 children during the nearly five-week California wildfire response. Reporting on the number of children served, however, only tells a portion of the story. It does not fully describe the value of the service provided, especially as regards the beginning of a healing process for children. A volunteer serving at the Resource Hub observed how letting a child direct their play in a calm and safe space can help them process their experience and begin to recover.

Late in the day a little boy was dropped off by his mother. When she was gone, he began crying and wouldn't play. I held him and rocked and sang to him until he quieted and settled. He said he wanted to get down and I asked, "Would you like to play?" He said no. Another volunteer picked up pool noodles and started batting some balls around hockey style. He immediately grabbed a noodle and began playing. After a minute or so he paused and said, "My house burned down. I don't have toys anymore." And he continued to play. – David Franklin

Like many CDS volunteers David reflected on another value of service with Children's Disaster Services. He said, "I come home more blessed than when I left."

Spring 2025 Volunteer Trainings

Children’s Disaster Services is always looking for volunteers to bring care and comfort to children who have experienced the trauma of disaster. If you feel led to explore serving with CDS, please consider attending one of the Spring 2025 trainings listed here. Don’t let distance keep you from attending—it is not unusual for participants to travel from other areas of the country to join a training.

- **March 28-29: Creekside Church of the Brethren, Elkhart, Indiana**
- **April 5-6: La Verne Church of the Brethren, La Verne, California**

CDS Responses

From October 2024 to mid-February 2025, 58 volunteers served 1,023 children during the following disaster responses.

Hurricane Helene: Fletcher and Asheville, N. C., October 2024; 13 volunteers (three teams) cared for 193 children in two Red Cross shelters and a Red Cross Family Assistance Center.

Hurricane Milton: Clearwater and Tampa, Fla., Oct. 27-Nov. 10, 2024; Eight volunteers (two teams) cared for 375 children in Red Cross shelters.

Wildfires: Camarillo, Calif., Nov. 14-17, 2024; Six volunteers from the Los Angeles area served nine children in a Local Assistance Center set up by

- **May 2-3: McPherson Church of the Brethren, McPherson, Kansas**

Learn more about CDS at www.brethren.org/cds. Training and registration information may be found at www.brethren.org/cds/training or, especially if you are interested in one of the earlier trainings, by contacting CDS at [cgs@brethren.org](mailto:cds@brethren.org) or 800-451-4407.

We welcome hosts for future trainings! We are always looking for welcoming spaces to hold CDS volunteer trainings. Please contact CDS if you are interested in finding out how to host a training in your area.

Cal OES (California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services); Altadena, Los Angeles, and Pasadena, Calif., Jan. 14-Feb. 12, 2025; 25 volunteers (four teams) served 515 children in five different Disaster Recovery Center locations at the invitation of the Red Cross and one California VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) Wildfire Resource Hub.

Terrorist Truck Attack: New Orleans, La., Jan. 4-12, 2025; Six CRC (Critical Response Childcare) volunteers served five children at the invitation of the Red Cross in an FBI Family Assistance Center.

CDS in the Eyes of Others

Nancy O’Neill and Wendy Hartley served in CDS’ final volunteer team to serve at a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) in response to the California wildfires. They shared the following.

Nancy: *I was overwhelmed by the deep appreciation for what we do that was expressed by everyone we met. From families of our children to other staff and volunteers at the DRC, to the doorman at our hotel, people were genuinely grateful. Two nights before we left, the restaurant even picked up the tab for our dinners as part of their appreciation for first responders program. The people of Los Angeles seem to be doing a great job of supporting one another at this difficult time and it meant a lot to me that they took the time to include us.*

Wendy: *A few children did not want to leave when their family came to pick them up. “Oh no!” one girl said when she saw her mom—lovely to know they enjoyed play time so much. Another girl said, “This is the best day ever.” Another said, “This is the best play group I have been to.”*



CDS care centers have a variety of play materials. (Hurricane Milton response, Florida)
Photo by Beverly Eikenberry



CDS disaster care centers provide an opportunity for children to relax and play away from the stress and chaos around them—something they may not have been able to do in the days following a disaster. In this photo, Nancy O’Neill plays with a child after the California wildfires.

Photo by Wendy Hartley

Hurricane Helene Recovery Continues

It has been six months since Hurricane Helene made landfall in Florida in September 2024, causing catastrophic destruction across seven states as it moved north. A harsh and cold winter, as well as some wildfires, have compounded the effect of the storm on some residents in Western North Carolina.

Andy Hamilton, district executive for the Church of the Brethren Southeastern District (SED), reports that they have worked hard to provide grants to churches to support survivors in their communities. These grants are made possible through funds received from many sources, including Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM) through the Emergency Disaster Fund (EDF). BDM continues to communicate with Hamilton and other district leaders regarding ways to provide support to those still in need.

The Southeastern District's Camp Carmel continued to distribute supplies, including some purchased with EDF funds, to members of the community through the fall. Camp director Erica Leeds was happy to share that they also held a Christmas toy distribution, giving out 800 toys to those impacted by the flooding in

Avery County.

As BDM's program of first response, Children's Disaster Services (CDS), in partnership with the Red Cross, sent three teams of volunteers during October 2024 to support children in the aftermath of Helene.

Demonstrating the Church of the Brethren concept of being Jesus in the Neighborhood, many districts, congregations, and individuals responded, and continue to respond, to the needs resulting from this destructive storm. There were fundraising efforts of all types; partnerships with local organizations to provide financial, material, and moral support; thousands of volunteer hours; and so much more.

The BDM Rebuilding Program continues to monitor reports and efforts from partners in the area focusing on long-term recovery, including a search for prospective partners to offer future volunteer opportunities. Development site visits will take place in early spring to identify possible locations for short or longer-term rebuilding options in the coming months to years. When those options are available, information will be distributed.

BDM is hosting an equipping session at the 2025 Annual Conference which will include a panel discussion with the leaders of several districts who were impacted or responded to Hurricanes Helene and Milton. It will take place on Friday, July 4 at 8:30 pm.

2025 Disaster Response Auctions

Brethren Disaster Ministries benefits greatly from the proceeds of several annual disaster relief auctions and other fundraisers. We are very grateful for the time, hard work, dedication, and creativity this represents—almost entirely by volunteer effort.

The dates for the 2025 auctions are listed below. For up-to-date information on the status of each auction, please note the contact information and check for updates closer to the dates of the auctions. We hope to see you there!

May 3: Mid-Atlantic District Disaster Response Auction—Carroll County Agricultural Center Shipley Arena in Westminster, Md.; Breakfast begins at 7:00 AM. See www.madcob.com/disaster-response-auction or call 443-960-3052

May 16 & 17: Shenandoah District Disaster Ministries Auction & Sale—Rockingham County Fairgrounds in Harrisonburg, Va.; See <https://shencob.org/disaster-auction-and-sale>; www.facebook.com/ShenandoahDistrictBrethrenAuction; or call 540-234-8555

Sept. 26 & 27: Brethren Disaster Relief Auction (Atlantic Northeast and Southern Pennsylvania districts)—Lebanon Valley Expo Center, Lebanon, Pa.; See www.brethrenauction.org; www.facebook.com/BrethrenDisasterRelief; or call 717-823-2745



Camp Carmel distributed clean-up and relief materials after Hurricane Helene, including mold remediation supplies, shown on the left, purchased with EDF grant funds. Photo courtesy of Virgina district

Brethren Disaster Ministries 2024 Rebuilding Responses

Project location	Disaster type	Weekly volunteers*	Work days	Hours served	Value of service**	Families served
Rebuilding Projects						
Dawson Springs, Ky.	Tornadoes	460	3,275	26,200	\$877,438.00	26
Eastern Kentucky	Flooding	184	1,268	10,144	\$339,722.56	11
BDM Short-term Responses						
Southeastern Ky.	Flooding	18	93	744	\$24,916.56	2
Totals		662	4,636	37,088	\$1,242,077.12	39

* Includes repeat volunteers **Estimated Value of Volunteer Services for 2024 was \$33.49 per Independent Sector

Children's Disaster Services 2024 Responses

Location	Disaster type	Volunteers*	Total work days	Hours served	Value of service**	Children served
Lakeview, Ohio	tornado	6	18	144	\$4,822.56	33
Minden, Iowa	tornado	4	8	64	\$2,143.36	1
Ironton, Mo.	tornado	3	6	48	\$1,607.52	0
Greenfield, Iowa	tornado	4	8	64	\$2,143.36	5
Sikeston, Mo.	tornado	3	3	24	\$803.76	12
Decatur & Rogers, Ark.	tornado	9	14	112	\$3,750.88	59
Roswell, N.M.	wildfire	4	28	224	\$7,501.76	0
Cuba, Ill.	flash flooding	1	1	8	\$267.92	1
Lake Isabella, Calif.	Borel wildfire	3	18	144	\$4,822.56	20
Lake Elsinore, Calif.	Airport fire	4	12	96	\$3,215.04	21
Fletcher & Asheville, N.C.	Hurricane Helene	13	182	1,456	\$48,761.44	193
Clearwater & Tampa, Fla.	Hurricane Milton	8	112	896	\$30,007.04	375
Camarillo, Calif.	wildfire	6	18	144	\$4,822.56	9
Totals	13 responses	68	428	3,424	\$114,669.76	729

*Includes repeat volunteers **Estimated Value of Volunteer Services for 2024 was \$33.49 per Independent Sector

Children's Disaster Services 2024 Training Workshops

Date	Location	Type of training	Participants	Trainers*	Volunteer trainer hours	Value of service**
4/12-4/13	Ankeny, Iowa	Level 1	13	2	40	1,339.60
9/27-9/28	Frederick, Md.	Level 1	12	4	80	\$2,679.20
9/28-9/29	Modesto, Calif.	Level 1	8	2	40	\$1,339.60
10/18-10/19	Victor, N.Y.	Level 1	9	2	40	1,339.60
Totals	4 trainings		42	10	200	\$6,698.00

* Includes repeat trainers **Estimated Value of Volunteer Services for 2024 was \$33.49 per Independent Sector

Project Expenses and Financial Reports

Due to technical issues with our computer servers, year-end financial information was not available when the Winter 2025 BRIDGES was printed. Watch for the 2024 project expenses graph and table in the Summer 2025 BRIDGES. While different from actual expenses, we can share that \$1,016,300 in Emergency Disaster Fund allocations were approved in 2024. These grants provided for CDS and Rebuilding programming in 10 states. It also funded international responses in 12 countries with the largest grants supporting CoB relief in Nigeria and Haiti. Please contact the BDM office if you have any questions or need financial information before the summer edition.

Focusing on Jesus, the Problem Solver

by Charity Oglesby

Before the tornado that hit Dawson Springs, Ky., in 2021, my husband Andrew and I lived a very lukewarm Christian lifestyle thinking that filling a church pew was good enough to make it. I thought I could live and do whatever I wanted. I would ask God for forgiveness because He is faithful to forgive. Thankfully though, I have a praying mom who cared so deeply about where our souls ended up. Never in our wildest dreams did we think this was how the Lord was going to get our attention.

Our lives were pretty normal before the tornado. Becoming friends in 2014, we started to date in 2016 and married by 2018. Then we welcomed the most beautiful and precious baby boy in June of 2021. However, the EF4 tornado ripped through our little town of 300, unfortunately killing 11 lives in its path, including our precious 5-and-a-half-month-old son, Chase Emmett Oglesby.

When the tornado hit us, we did not expect it, because according to the radars we were looking at, the tornado was going in a different direction. We

found out afterwards that the tornado hit a body of water and shifted toward us. Within 10-15 seconds we were hit. It ripped the roof off our house and sucked Andrew out. Then the floor lifted up and landed on me, causing my spinal cord injury. Andrew's injuries included: a hematoma on his butt, a broken jaw, five broken ribs, and a broken neck. My injuries were: T4 vertebrae crushed, C1 vertebrae fractured, crushed left eye socket, dislocation of the upper palate in my mouth, and in October or November of 2022, we found out that I had fractured my right wrist, which unfortunately completely broke over time.

There's so much that I could go into of all the trials and things that we had to endure over the years. However, the main parts I want to focus on telling are how the Lord has helped us through all of this tragedy. Andrew got his peace over Chase at his funeral, and on March 23, 2022, the Lord gave me the peace I needed over Chase when God showed me Chase in heaven, perfectly safe. Also telling me to "trust Him", whenever I asked Him what I was supposed to do.

Then on December 10, 2022, Andrew told me, "God told me to not go back to work and to stay home and take care of you, and that He would take care of us." He had to decide by December 12. On December 11, that Sunday, our pastor preached on child-like faith, saying, "sometimes we have to become like children again and depend on the Father." Andrew and I looked at each other and knew right then what to do. He called work and told them he wasn't returning, and here we are in October 2024, and the Lord is still providing.

Now, has it been easy ever since? Absolutely not! This has been the most difficult thing I have ever gone through. But I do know one thing: I would not have been able to get through it without the Lord.

Choosing to give it over to the Lord was one of the greatest decisions of my life. Asking Jesus into my heart to be my Lord and Savior was the best choice I have ever made. It is only through God that I am who I am today. Having the peace, comfort, strength, courage, hope, and joy that I now have that can only come from God. Seeking after the Lord is the best thing anyone can do. Because when you do seek after Him with all your heart, you will find Him. He will make Himself known. Is it an easy journey? No, it is not. Because we have a spiritual enemy that is also coming to do all they can to steal, kill, and destroy. But Jesus came to give us life, and life more abundant.

There's an important lesson to learn, especially through the trials and tribulations of this life, and that is what our perspective is on. Is our perspective on the problems that we are going through, or on the Problem Solver? Through this whole situation, Andrew and I have tried to keep our focus on the Lord. Looking at what the Lord is doing in our lives is evidence of how important praising the Lord through the difficulties really is. It makes me think of Ephesians 3:20, "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us."

To sit here and watch how the Lord is providing a house for us, in fact, a house that is double the square footage than what we had before the tornado, it makes you think of the story of Job, how he lost everything, but never cursed God. He continued to praise God, and in the end, God blessed Job back double everything he lost. I'm so thankful to know in Hebrews 13:8 that "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever."

Charity and Andrew Oglesby were the recipients of a new home in 2024 in Western Kentucky on which BDM Rebuilding volunteers worked in partnership with Habitat for Humanity Pennyrile Region.



Charity and Andrew Oglesby (c and r) hold the quilts presented to them during the blessing of her new home, with BDM director Jenn Dorsch-Messler (l) and BDM long-term construction leader Steve Keim.

Photo courtesy of BDM

Annual Conference and Virtual Blood Drives: Putting Faith Into Action

The 2025 Annual Conference Blood Drive will be held in the Sheraton Greensboro Heritage Room on **Thursday, July 3, from 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM, and Friday, July 4, from 7:00 AM to 1:00 PM** in partnership with the American Red Cross.

Secure the blood donation appointment that is best for you by signing up for the day and time of your choice at www.brethren.org/ac2025/BloodDrive.

You may also sign up during the conference. Look for the BDM Blood Drive table in the conference registration area or see Brenda or Ed Palsgrove. To volunteer to help with registration or at the snack/recovery area, contact Sharon (sfranzen@brethren.org) before the conference or Brenda or Ed Palsgrove during the conference.

Virtual Blood Drive

If you are not attending the Annual Conference, you can still be a part of the blood donation efforts by joining the **Virtual Blood Drive** and **donating locally between June 1 and July 31**. It's easy—just follow the steps below. For more information or questions, contact BDM at 800-451-4407 or bdm@brethren.org.

- Pledge to participate through our online campaign by following www.brethren.org/virtualblooddrive2025 (or use the QR code on this page) or by contacting BDM. Pledging is not required but it does help us know about and follow up on your desire to donate.
- Find a local blood drive at www.redcrossblood.org/give.html/find-drive or through your local blood services agency. Make an appointment between June 1 and July 31. Or take it a step further and organize a blood drive at your church!
- Remember to give blood and to tell BDM that you followed through with your pledge. Use the online portal or email/call BDM. We won't know if you don't tell us!

- Take a photo, if you can, and send it to us. We can share it to celebrate AND to encourage others to donate.

The Virtual Blood Drive and in-person Blood Drive totals will be pulled together to get a full picture of the Brethren who are saving lives this summer by putting their faith into action!



Eileen Fiegenbaum participated in the 2024 Virtual Blood Drive. It was her 45th blood donation. She remarked "I was proud to tell the staffers ... all about the blood drive at Annual Conference, and the COB's mission with blood drives. They were quite interested and gave me an extra granola bar & a red umbrella!"

Photo courtesy of Eileen Fiegenbaum

Be like Janice! Plan to give blood at the Annual Conference.

Photo by Donna Purcell



Annual Conference Breakfast for BDM/CDS Volunteers and Supporters

Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM) will hold a free **Volunteer and Supporter Breakfast** at the 2025 Annual Conference in Greensboro, N.C., on **Friday, July 4 from 7:00-8:30 AM** to celebrate and thank current and past volunteers and supporters of BDM and Children's Disaster Services (CDS). **Pre-register by June 10** to reserve

your seat by contacting BDM or CDS (800-451-4407; bdm@brethren.org; [cgs@brethren.org](mailto:cds@brethren.org)). A limited number of spaces may be available during the conference for those who have not pre-registered, but this is not guaranteed due to the need to pre-order meals. We are looking forward to celebrating with you!

A Journey of Service—My Time with Brethren Disaster Ministries

By Keke (Lieketseng) Phooko, Brethren Volunteer Service volunteer serving with the BDM Rebuilding Program

Growing up in Lesotho, a small landlocked country inside of South Africa, I always dreamed of traveling, meeting new people, experiencing different cultures, and trying new things. But where I come from, traveling is a privilege, and for many, it remains just a dream. I didn't have the money to explore the world, but I always believed that God has His own way of making things happen. In my case, that was through volunteer service.

When I arrived in Letcher County, Ky., in September 2024 to begin my Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS) working with Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM), I didn't know what to expect. All I knew was that I had come to serve, to help rebuild homes, and to be part of something bigger than myself. My journey of service had already taken me to Canada, Zimbabwe, and Virginia, with each place teaching me valuable lessons about people, resilience, and the power of working together.

As we rebuild homes in Kentucky, I realize that this experience is about more than just physical work. It is also about the relationships we build, the lessons we learn, and the personal transformation that happens along the way. I found more than just work. I found family, friendships, and valuable lessons that will stay with me forever. Before joining BDM, I had never done construction work. But today, I can proudly say I have learned skills I never imagined—flooring, drywalling, and so much more. By the time I go back home, I think I'll be a professional!

I have learned that service is not just about giving, it's also about receiving. Every homeowner we helped had a story and through their gratitude I was reminded of the power of kindness and community. I also saw how strong human connections can be. It's never easy to say goodbye after spending a week working with a team of

volunteers and leaders, but that's the beauty of service—it brings people together in ways we never expect.

As I reflect on this journey, I see how my childhood dreams have come true—not because I had money, but because I was open to opportunities and willing to serve. Service has taken me places I never thought I would go, connected me with people I never thought I would meet, and taught me things I never thought I would learn.

I am grateful to every person I have met along the way: volunteers, homeowners, team leaders, local community members, and everyone who has been part of this journey. Each of you has played a role in shaping this experience and I will carry these memories with me always.

To anyone considering service, step forward, even if you don't know where the path will lead. You may just find that in giving of yourself, you receive far more than you ever expected.

Keke (left) working to hang drywall with BDM volunteer Curtis Rink.

Photo courtesy of BDM



Keke (left) and Sandy Bruens show off their new BDM nail aprons. Photo courtesy of BDM



Letter of Gratitude

Shane Witty, construction manager, Habitat for Humanity Pennyriple Region (Kentucky)

It has been my pleasure to work with Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM) for the last months. The manner in which the entire organization handles their mission on a daily basis has been very impressive to be a part of and witness. Every leader, volunteer group, and administrator has come with a wonderful attitude and will to work that is not often seen, even when you pay folks. Every Monday morning, I would come in and see a new group of volunteers with smiles on their faces, eager to work and willing to

accomplish goals that they have set for themselves. They give of their time, skills, and knowledge with the best of intentions. In the eight months I have been privileged to work with BDM, they have built 14 houses for tornado victims in Dawson Springs, Ky. 14! This has been along with numerous other projects in the community. BDM is a first-class organization with first class people from top to bottom. It has been a blessing to be associated and work with such an outstanding group of people.



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Rebuilding Updates

Letcher County, Ky.

In September 2024, Brethren Disaster Ministries (BDM) opened a rebuilding project site in Letcher County, Ky., to support recovery from flooding in 2022. In partnership with HOMES Inc., a local organization, volunteers have been working on repairing damaged homes (with many being elevated) and on new construction on higher ground properties to enable families to relocate out of the floodplains.

Volunteer housing is located in Fleming-Neon, Ky., in multiple buildings owned by HOMES Inc. This project is scheduled to stay open through the end of 2025. Visit www.brethren.org/bdm/rebuild/projects for more information and to see

videos about the impact of the flooding as well as what the BDM site looks like.

Dawson Springs, Ky.

After almost two years in partnership with Habitat for Humanity of the Pennyryle Region, the Dawson Springs, Ky., project closed. In this time, BDM helped to rebuild 53 new homes for families impacted by the 2021 tornadoes that ripped through the area just before Christmas.

Thank you to all the volunteers and leaders who served on this site from January 2022 through November 2024 to bring hope, and in some cases first-time homeownership, to the survivors we served.



When the BDM Dawson Springs site closed, the temporary “cube” that was built specifically for housing BDM volunteers was torn down. This makes room for Habitat to return to regular operations in the building.

Photo courtesy of BDM

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