

Building Bridges Veterans Initiative Convention Report, 2025

The Building Bridges Veterans Initiative, mandated by Bishop Fisher at the start of his episcopate, continues to expand, as it has since its inception. Now seventeen sites strong, the monthly gatherings take place in five New England dioceses. The need to address the tragic challenges that face our military veterans—depression, PTSD, and suicide risk—has never been greater. The Diocese of Western Massachusetts has created a highly innovative model to address the debilitating social isolation that so often accompanies military service on and off the battlefield. Within and beyond the walls of our church buildings, the Diocese is bringing God's healing to those who have risked their lives for us all.

I invite you to learn more about the ministry by visiting the Building Bridges website at www.buildingbridgesveterans.org. Harvard psychologist, Jonathan Shay, who has devoted most of his career to veteran mental health, believes that the most effective healing of veterans happens veteran-to-veteran, and helped to inspire and justify the Building Bridges mission. In his book, *Achilles in Vietnam*, he says, "God's love for humankind is one of our present culture's all-pervasive, invisible, unquestioned, and thus unconscious assumptions. When war shattered this assumption, American soldiers in Vietnam lost a sustaining idea."

Hosting veterans for complimentary breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, Building Bridges facilitates peer support among those who have known what it means to suffer the traumas of war, and to embark on the long road to healing. Beyond coalescing these communities of healing, Building Bridges provides venues for the VA and other veterans organizations to make available services that often go unknown to our veterans. Having exceeded 110,000 meals served over the course of its ten-year life, the initiative most recently added sites at All Saints, South Hadley, Saint Michael's Church in Bristol, Rhode Island, and All Saints, Worcester opens on November 12.

With the departure of our Associate Director, Building Bridges has cut its budget by almost half. The Director has reimagined the organization to rely more heavily on volunteer leadership in order to continue the expansion. While the transformation has posed challenges, over the past six months since his departure, Building Bridges continues to thrive, with several sites periodically exceeding 100 veterans, while most see at least 50 veterans coming through their doors. We look forward to continued expansion and program development to cover all seven New England dioceses, which would make Building Bridges an authentically trans-diocesan, Province-wide initiative under the leadership of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts.

It is with deep gratitude that I give thanks for the Diocesan commitment to this critical, crisis-oriented ministry. In the words of U. S. Congressman Jim McGovern, "I am convinced that if it were not for Building Bridges, the suicide incidence rate for veterans would be much higher." Closer to home, one of our Vietnam veterans in Greenfield privately confided, "If it weren't for Building Bridges, I wouldn't be here today."

Respectfully Submitted,
The Rev. Christopher Carlisle, Director
Building Bridges Veterans Initiative