

Pittsburgh Bridge Collapses, Raising Infrastructure Questions

The Wired Word for the Week of February 6, 2022

In the News

In Pittsburgh's Frick Park, a bridge over the Fern Hollow Creek collapsed on Friday, January 28. Several vehicles, including a bus, were on the span when it fell down. Ten injuries were reported, and four people were taken to area hospitals.

The bridge came down at 6:39 a.m., according to city officials. Witnesses reported that a loud noise from the collapse was followed by a hissing sound and the smell of natural gas. Homes were evacuated due to the gas leak, but residents were soon able to return to their homes.

According to *Pittsburgh's Action News*, first responders had to rappel approximately 150 feet and form a human chain to reach the people in the bus that fell along with the bridge into the ravine. A driver and two passengers were on the bus, which was traveling outbound from downtown Pittsburgh when the collapse occurred. The bridge is used by about 14,500 vehicles every day.

"A half hour later the bridge would've been full with vehicles of commuters going back-and-forth," said Darryl Jones, Chief of Pittsburgh's Bureau of Fire. "It would've been a lot worse. No one died. I know a lot of people are upset ... 'Do you know how this could happen?' It's under investigation. We are going to try to determine that."

The Pennsylvania Urban Search and Rescue Team was called in, and the team drilled into parts of the bridge to gain access to spaces where people could be trapped. Authorities flew drones to look for victims under collapsed sections of the bridge, and a search-and-rescue team inspected the area for any other possible victims.

A Pittsburgh couple named Tyrone and Velva Perry, both 69, were in a red pickup truck on the bridge when the collapse occurred. According to *Trib Live*, the Perrys were traveling to the home of Tyrone's 93-year-old mother when the nearly 500-foot-long bridge buckled like a "V." When the middle of the bridge fell more than 100 feet and hit the ground, the pickup's windshield cracked and airbags deployed. Both of the Perrys were wearing seatbelts. "My father described when he saw the bridge buckling, he thought he was going to die," said Erin Perry, one of their children.

During the collapse, a vehicle flew past the Perrys' truck. Another car tumbled toward them and landed just a few feet away. "It's so outrageous that this would happen," said Erin Perry, "it was like a scene from an action movie."

The couple had to exit their vehicle quickly because of the gas leak caused by the bridge collapse. "The Port Authority police and one of the other drivers carried my mother from the bridge to a bench," their daughter said. Then another driver gave Tyrone Perry his coat. "There was a rise of so much love," she said. "The world is in chaotic disarray and this brought out the best in people. Love was the dominant force."

The evening of the collapse, officials of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) arrived to investigate. The NTSB Board Chair, Jennifer Homendy, said that investigators would move down into the ravine and pinpoint what triggered the collapse.

"Our engineering team will look for signs of stress in the materials that comprise the bridge, signs of fracture, signs of deterioration," said Dennis Collins, an NTSB investigator.

Coincidentally, President Joe Biden was in Pittsburgh for a previously scheduled speech on infrastructure, and was able to visit the site of the bridge collapse. "I didn't realize," he said, "there are literally more bridges in Pittsburgh than any other city in the world. More than Venice. I knew there were a lot of bridges -- I had no idea of that. And we're gonna fix them all. It's not a joke. This is going to be a gigantic change. There's 43,000 nationwide and we're sending them money." Infrastructure has been a common theme of Democratic and Republican politicians for years, since it plays well with voters.

According to Public Safety officials, the span was most recently inspected in September 2021. Overall, the bridge was reported to be in "poor" condition, with the deck condition assessed as "poor" and the substructure as "satisfactory." A Pittsburgh city councilman named Corey O'Connor said, "I don't know the standards to when you get to a point where it has [to] be shut down, but I think that's something that we have to look at as a council."

Applying the News Story

Use the collapse of the Pittsburgh bridge as an opportunity to discuss what we need to rebuild in our personal and congregational lives as we come out of the pandemic. What should you rebuild and what should you abandon? The past two years have been a huge challenge, but also an opportunity to repair our infrastructure.

The Big Questions

1. Where do you see signs of stress, fracture and deterioration in your personal life, after two years of pandemic? Where do you see such signs in your congregational life, if at all?
2. The Pittsburgh bridge was judged to be in "poor" and "satisfactory" condition prior to its collapse. How would you judge the life of your church at this time, and what could you do to improve it, if possible?
3. What are the foundations of your faith? What practices do you use to regularly ensure the foundation is strong? When have you experienced cracks in the foundation of your faith? What was the cause? What repairs were needed? Were they short-term or longer-term repairs? Explain.
4. Churches have had to adapt to Covid restrictions in a variety of ways. What adaptations have worked well for you, and what will you continue to do? What will you abandon?
5. "There was a rise of so much love," said Erin Perry, daughter of two of the bridge collapse victims. "The world is in chaotic disarray and this brought out the best in people. Love was the dominant force." How has this been true in your own pandemic experience, and how has it failed to be true?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 20:3-9

³May he remember all your offerings, and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices. Selah

⁴May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfill all your plans.

⁵May we shout for joy over your victory, and in the name of our God set up our banners. May the LORD fulfill all your petitions.

⁶Now I know that the LORD will help his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with mighty victories by his right hand.

⁷Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God.

⁸They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright.

⁹Give victory to the king, O LORD; answer us when we call.

Questions: When has your faith enabled you to "rise and stand upright" in a challenging situation? Where do you see people "collapse and fall" when they put their confidence elsewhere?

Isaiah 30:8-18

⁸Go now, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. ⁹For they are a rebellious people, faithless children, children who will not hear the instruction of the LORD; ¹⁰who say to the seers, “Do not see”; and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, ¹¹leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.” ¹²Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel: Because you reject this word, and put your trust in oppression and deceit, and rely on them; ¹³therefore this iniquity shall become for you like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant; ¹⁴its breaking is like that of a potter’s vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a sherd is found for taking fire from the hearth, or dipping water out of the cistern. ¹⁵For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. But you refused ¹⁶and said, “No! We will flee upon horses”— therefore you shall flee! and, “We will ride upon swift steeds”— therefore your pursuers shall be swift! ¹⁷A thousand shall flee at the threat of one, at the threat of five you shall flee, until you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill.

¹⁸Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.

Questions: Looking back over the past two years, where do you see cracks in the institutions of our society: Schools, churches, businesses, government, “experts”? What, if anything, can be done to repair these breaks and prevent collapses?

Matthew 7:24-29

²⁴“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” ²⁸Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Questions: How have you attempted to hear the words of Jesus and act on them during this time of pandemic? What effect has this had on your personal life and congregational life? Where do you see opportunities to strengthen the foundation of your spiritual house?

Luke 13:1-5

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Questions: What does it mean to you to repent and go in a new direction? How can this be done individually, and as a community? Even if we are not responsible for our suffering (falling towers, global pandemics), why should we repent?

Responding to the News

Prayer