

Driven to Serve

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Retired RV enthusiasts travel the country to assist others

Like many retirees, Mike and Carol Johnson load up their fifth-wheel trailer just after Christmas each year and drive south. They don't head to the beach or the golf course, however. Instead, the Brownsburg, Indiana, residents head to a camp, community center, children's home or other facility with ties to the United Methodist Church and in need of remodeling or repair.



Adding siding to a home that was damaged by a hurricane in Grand Isle, La. in April 2023. | Credit: NOMADS

The Johnsons are volunteers with [NOMADS](#) (Nomads On a Mission Active in Divine Service), which coordinates volunteer labor for historically Methodist organizations around the country. In 2023, NOMADS volunteers donated 74,898 hours of service in more than 30 states. That work was worth more than \$2.38 million, according to the per-hour value estimated by [Independent Sector](#).

An Appealing Mix

To the Johnsons, NOMADS, which was founded in 1988, offers an appealing mix of travel, fellowship and service. "If you're wanting to travel the country, but you have had it laid on your heart that God has something for you to be doing for those that are in need, NOMADS is a fantastic organization," says Mike Johnson, who is a member of the group's board of directors.

"While we had this desire to travel around the country in an RV and to see and experience many different places and people, we said we just can't do that and not give back to God in some way."

NOMADS isn't the only option for altruistic RVers. Habitat for Humanity has the [RV Care-A-Vanner](#) program, for example, while the American Red Cross has the [DOVE \(Disaster Operations Volunteer Escapees\)](#) program. And many retirees serve with federal agencies like the National Park Service throughout the year. (At [Volunteer.gov](#), potential volunteers can search for opportunities that offer RV hookups.)

But NOMADS was the right option for the Johnsons, who are longtime Methodists. "While we had this desire to travel around the country in an [RV](#) and to see and experience many different places and people, we said we just can't do that and not give back to God in some way," Mike Johnson says.

The couple sought out the group, but other volunteers discover it at camps, RV rallies or trade shows. Word of mouth is also important. "We don't have too many folks — that I've come across, anyways — that found out about NOMADS and then decided to go out and buy a rig," Mike Johnson says. "It usually doesn't happen in that sequence."



The Johnsons typically start the winter with a NOMADS project on the way to warmer climes, then a second project on the way back to Indiana in May. They'll also pick up a project or two closer to home over the summer or fall. "Since we retired in 2015, we've spent 480 nights on the road either to, from or doing NOMADS projects," Mike Johnson says. (If you do the math, that's about 53 nights per year.)

Standard NOMADS projects last three weeks and occur throughout the year. Members log into the group's website to sign up for projects based on where the projects are, what work they involve and often who else will be working. Some members like to sign up with friends, while others use projects as a way to meet people.

Systematic Service

One couple, or occasionally a single person, takes the lead on each project and coordinates with the partner agency. They communicate with team members on the nature of the work, whether they need to bring supplies and — perhaps most importantly — what RV facilities are available, from full hookups to electricity- or water- only.



NOMADS volunteers Mike and Carol Johnson at a work site, Pine Creek Camp in Indiana. | Credit: NOMADS

"In the RV world, the big deals on hookups are how many amps of power am I going to have and if I'm going to have sewer connections or not," Mike Johnson says. (The agency agrees to provide free RV facilities; volunteers cover their own meals.)

Although the projects vary, the weekly routine is the same. Members arrive over a weekend, when they usually attend church together, go out to lunch and generally get organized. They work Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., then have a three-day weekend to do laundry, visit family, see the sights or travel to their next destination.

Experience Not Required

Mindful of some volunteers' physical capabilities, each day includes several mandatory breaks. "We don't want to make anybody feel bad that they can't work as hard as somebody else can," Mike Johnson says.

After work, there's plenty of time for socializing. "Somebody may say, 'I'm ready for ice cream tonight; who wants to go?'" Carol Johnson says. "Or they'll get together and work a puzzle or play [games](#). It's all very informal and kind of depends on the makeup of the group."

As you might expect, members' skills vary widely. "The NOMADS are very good about teaching those who don't know how to do a project," Carol Johnson says.



Cleaning out a flowerbed in front of a cabin at Cedar Crest Camp, Lyles, Tenn. in October 2023. | Credit: NOMADS

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the NOMADS added another service option: [disaster rebuilding](#). "We come in well after the initial disaster, and we try to reconstruct the lives of the folks in that disaster area," Mike Johnson says. These projects last for months, not weeks, but volunteers sign up for a week at a time.

Drop-Ins Are Welcome

Drop-in projects are the third option. Here, individuals or couples visit agencies NOMADS has previously served to do smaller projects for a few days. A few years ago, for example, the Johnsons helped refurbish lodges at a Northern Indiana church camp that Carol Johnson had attended as a child. "It was fun to go back the first time," she says. "And now it's nice to go back and just see how we can help them stay current."

They may be going back to that camp for years to come. "We have people that are pushing 90 that are still working projects," Mike Johnson says.

And many will keep working as long as they can drive a rig and wield a paintbrush.