



Disaster and Recovery Ministries SA Report

1. Executive Summary

In the last 12 months South Australia, along with much of the rest of the country, has experienced some of the worst bushfires for many years. There was a huge call on our D&RM chaplains to assist with the pastoral and spiritual support of many, many people affected by these fires – in Emergency Relief Centres, Recovery Centres, on outreach teams and at community meetings and events. Our team was also invited to offer pastoral support over the phone during the intense first couple of months of the COVID-19 restrictions. Throughout the year we have continued to expand our team by training new chaplains from a variety of Christian churches as well as from some other major faith groups. Almost all training has happened via Zoom, of necessity, but people have adapted quickly despite some initial reluctance. Our chaplaincy team is well placed to respond if and when the need arises across our state in coming days.

2. Who are we and What do we do?

Disaster & Recovery Ministries is an ecumenical team co-ordinated by the Uniting Church – we co-ordinate a team of well-trained people (lay and ordained, all of whom are known as chaplains) from many Christian denominations and some other faith groups who are able to respond to a call on relatively short notice from the Emergency Relief Functional Support Group (part of SA Housing Authority) in the event of a declared disaster or emergency in SA as part of the State Emergency Management Plan. We currently have around 300 people trained for this ministry across S.A. from a range of denominations and scattered across the urban, regional and rural areas.

A partnership was established with Schools Ministry Group in 2016, whereby D&RM trains many of the Pastoral Care Workers who are part of SMG with specific skills for disaster chaplaincy. This training is valuable for PCWs who often have to deal with crises in their school communities (accidents, critical incidents, deaths) and they are then accredited with D&RM as members of our team, available to be deployed in the event of a disaster in the wider community. This partnership continues to be healthy and significant for everyone concerned, and has contributed to the growth of our widespread network across SA.

About 40% of our current active chaplains are Uniting Church, with smaller numbers from a spread of other Christian denominations and a very small number other faith groups. One of the delights of this ministry is to see chaplains come together at training events and on teams from a range of different faith backgrounds and to see them put any differences behind them and focus on what unites us in this context: caring for stressed, grieving and anxious people in gentle and compassionate ways that minister love and grace to them.

Chaplains are trained to listen without judgment and to help explore the questions without having the answers. We have no agenda, no forms to complete, no statistics to keep. We won't talk to people about God (unless people want that) and we don't attempt to change people's beliefs or tell them what to do. Our focus is on compassion, comfort and simply offering to 'be there' for people in need as part of their holistic care during and after a disaster. This may sometimes involve assessing someone's need for further

counselling or other referrals. Our chaplains operate under a strict Code of Ethics and Guiding Principles in order to ensure accountability and integrity.

Our Chaplaincy teams work alongside other participating organisations (Red Cross, Lions, Rotary, Save the Children etc) in Emergency Relief Centres and in outreach teams in caring for people by providing a listening ear, offering a ministry of presence and comfort and assessing need for further counselling or other referrals. We also endeavour to work with local churches and other faith groups in these situations, recognising that they may have an ongoing significant role to play in the recovery of individuals and communities after the event. Our chaplains complete an intensive training course, are accredited for 3 years (at which time they must update their training), must show evidence of a current Working with Children Check and are supplied with photo IDs and badged lanyards to wear when they are deployed.

3. Summary of Key Activities Since November 2019

3.1 Deployments

In South Australia in 2019, the first bushfire occurred near Port Lincoln on 11 November, shortly after a brief but significant hailstorm in the Riverland the previous week. This was shortly followed by a heatwave and power outage on the Eyre Peninsula and a bushfire around Yorketown and Edithburgh the following week. On 20 December extreme conditions across most of the state resulted in simultaneous bushfires at Angle Vale, Cudlee Creek and Maitland. Emergency Relief Centres were opened in 4 locations in response to these fires, although those for Angle Vale and Maitland were not needed for very long. On 30 December 2019 a fire broke out in the Keilira region in the South-East. Early in January 2020 catastrophic fires on Kangaroo Island flared up from those which also began on 20 December 2019 and burned for many days.

Disaster and Recovery Ministries chaplains were immediately activated in each of these disasters and were able to respond quickly and willingly to Emergency Relief Centres as required. This included Centres at Coobowie, Gawler, Highbury, Mount Barker, Minlaton and Kingscote. When Recovery Centres were opened at Yorketown, Lobethal and Parndana, chaplains were onsite to assist disaster-affected people for as long as these centres were operational until COVID-19 restrictions dictated that it was no longer safe or prudent for volunteers to be present. Chaplains were part of outreach teams on the Yorke Peninsula, Adelaide Hills and Kangaroo Island from the time these teams were set up by SA Government staff until COVID-19 restrictions about mid-March forced their cessation for everyone's safety. Chaplains also supported many community meetings held in these disaster-affected areas (including Keilira) with their presence to comfort and listen to people.

In each of these deployments, chaplains were welcomed, valued and appreciated. Their calm, non-anxious presence was received warmly by disaster-affected people presenting to the Centres, as well as by SA Housing Authority, other SA Government staff and representatives of other agencies working to assist people in these difficult times. As well as offering pastoral and spiritual support, many chaplains undertook quiet practical tasks in order to ensure that Centres continued to run smoothly and that staff were cared for as well as possible.

Over the course of Black Summer 2019-20 in South Australia:

- 154 individual volunteer chaplains were deployed on at least one occasion
- 1353 shifts were completed (each shift averaged 5 hours)
- At least 6765 volunteer hours were contributed by chaplains in Relief and Recovery Centres and on outreach teams

From late March until 31 May, we had chaplains on call at the end of a phone 7 days a week for a Virtual Relief Centre established by SA Housing Authority for those in isolation, alternative accommodation or stressed by the COVID-19 pandemic in some ways. This was a little-used but much appreciated additional support to the community during this season.

In addition over 30 chaplains participated in a round of training/mock disaster exercises around the state in the lead-up to the 2020/21 summer bushfire season, such as there have been in previous years. These exercises are always valuable opportunities to be involved with other partner organisations, so that relationships are strengthened as everyone needs to work together as a close team in these circumstances. The credibility and compassionate, non-judgmental nature of chaplains has been important in helping to allay the fears of those who may have previously viewed our presence with suspicion and mis-trust. In fact the presence and important role of chaplains to provide pastoral and spiritual support in this context is being assumed and much appreciated by other organisations.

3.2 Training

Except for two refresher training events in January, all our courses have been conducted online in 2020. Despite the more unfamiliar and less than ideal medium, trainees adapted well and this method meant that there was no need for travel either for rural and regional chaplains or for Rev Dr Stephen Robinson, UCA National Disaster Recovery Officer and our primary trainer based in Sydney.

In August a small group of D&RM SA chaplains also participated in a 3-day Suicide Prevention, Intervention and Postvention course by Zoom which was facilitated by retired Chief Inspector Gary Raymond APM, OAM. This was an extremely valuable course, adding considerably to the skills and experience of the participants especially in the current season which has strained the mental and emotional health of so many people, sometimes to the limit.

3.3 Staffing and Oversight

Since 1 October 2020, the role of the Coordinator (Wendy Perkins) has increased its paid FTE to 0.4, and continues to be supported by an Administration Assistant Helen Birch on a casual basis. With such a large team of chaplains and so many deployments in the first half of 2020, there is a constant flow of work to ensure that our team members maintain their accreditation and are ready to be deployed at very short notice if needed. Over the years our systems and processes have continued to improve to become more efficient and effective for all concerned.

The members of the ecumenical Coordinating Committee for this ministry continue to serve it well and we are thankful for their wisdom, experience and passion: Rev Philip Gardner (Chair), Rev Ashley Davis (UCA),

Ms Jan Trengove OAM (UCA), Rev Peter Miller (Lutheran), Peter Skurray (Schools Ministry Group), Rev Susan Straub (Anglican), Ms Wendy Perkins (UCA – Coordinator), Ms Helen Birch (Minute Secretary). Ashley concluded his time on the Committee late in 2020 after many years of valuable service with a strong rural focus. His wisdom and insight will be greatly missed! A replacement appointment has yet to be made at the time of writing.

3.4 National Co-operation

The annual national meeting of UCA coordinators of chaplaincy teams and disaster support initiatives was held online in late August to share information and encourage one another. Members of the Australian Volunteer Emergency Chaplaincy Alliance (AVECA), an official network of the National Council of Churches in Australia, met frequently (online) during the height of the pandemic in the second quarter of 2019. AVECA aims to facilitate cooperation, advocacy and the development of national standards and capacity in the area of emergency ministry chaplaincy. It is exciting to see growth in this unique chaplaincy across all states and territories, and particularly to see the increasing recognition of chaplaincy as a vital resource in supporting individuals and communities experiencing a range of challenging and traumatising circumstances.

4. Forward Thinking

It has been pleasing to see some slow but steady growth in the numbers of chaplains joining our team from other major faiths as well as from some CALD communities, thus better reflecting our increasingly multifaith and multicultural community in SA. We will continue to seek to recruit into these areas in the future.

Together with so many other ministries and groups, the challenges of a year dominated by a global pandemic have been felt in our inability to gather people together physically in regional groups for mutual encouragement and consideration of issues particular to local communities. This will become a priority as soon as COVID restrictions make it possible. Likewise conversations have begun with State and Local Government about ways in which chaplains could be engaged to offer assistance where there is significant grief in a community affecting large numbers of people which may be beyond the capacity of the local churches or faith groups to offer sufficient pastoral and spiritual support. Opportunities to pursue these conversations will be actively pursued in 2021.

The challenge to continue to be financially self-sustaining is always with us, and is even more urgent given the current economic climate and minimal income available from interest. We are always looking for opportunities to obtain additional funding so that this ministry can continue well into the future.

There is also much work to be done in helping churches think through how they can support their own local community in the event of a disaster. If your congregation or Ministers Association would like to know more, or to host a training event please contact Wendy Perkins via the Synod Office.

Wendy Perkins

Coordinator, Disaster and Recovery Ministries SA

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