

Disaster and Recovery Ministries SA

1. Who We Are and What We Do

Disaster & Recovery Ministries, co-ordinated by the Uniting Church, is an ecumenical 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 260 people trained, accredited and active in this ministry across S.A. from a range of faith communities 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 may then choose to be 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, contributing to the growth of our widespread network across SA.

About 30% of our current active chaplains are Uniting Church members, 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.

2. Key Activities Since October 2024

2.1 Training and Resourcing

Since the completion of our lengthy and well-received deployment to support individuals and communities affected by the Riverland floods (December 2022 – June 2023), there have not been any disasters in SA which have resulted in a deployment of D&RM chaplains, which of course is pleasing

but a little frustrating at times. Hence our efforts have been focused on training, equipping and keeping up the morale amongst our team members. We have run at least 2 courses each year to train new chaplains over 2 days in suburban, rural and regional areas and are often hosted by UC congregations, to whom we are very grateful. In addition, we continue to run a series of refresher courses both in person and online in order to ensure that chaplains maintain accreditation as required. These training opportunities continue to develop the team in quantity and quality and maintain our preparedness and vigilance in the event of a deployment at any time.

We have also continued to roll out and refine the use of a web-based browser app as our main means of communication between the operations team and chaplains before and during deployments. Whilst this has been challenging for some, it is a significant step for our ministry. In order to ensure that the system is familiar and effective, we have been intermittently running a series of mock/desktop exercises and will continue to do so from time to time.

In order to build and develop relationships amongst the chaplaincy team across regions, we have held some regional meetings which have been opportunities for networking, information and encouragement. We have taken these opportunities to acknowledge and celebrate chaplains who have been active members of the team for 5 and 10 years – significant milestones to be achieved!

2.2 Staffing and Oversight

The role of the Coordinator, currently held by Wendy Perkins, is designated as 2 days per week. This role involves all administration, recruiting, training, resourcing, deploying and the ongoing management of more than 260 volunteer chaplains, as well as liaising with SA Government emergency management staff and other participating organisations on an ongoing basis

A small number of Duty Officers have now been trained and are now rostered (usually in pairs) to be the responsible person/s if and when D&RM is activated by SA Government, especially if the Coordinator is on leave or the deployment warrants extra help. This will help to shoulder the operations load of the Coordinator, as well as giving more people the opportunity to step up into leadership.

A Coordinating Committee, appointed by the Synod Standing Committee gives helpful oversight to the ministry and the members are always ready to provide advice, support and encouragement. Current members are Rev Andrew Robertson (chair), Jan Trengove (UCA), Rev Peter Miller (Lutheran), Tim Wells (Lutheran and Schools Ministry Group), Rev Susan Straub (Anglican), Rev Louise Lang (Anglican), Bob Setton (Beit Shalom Jewish Community) and Wendy Perkins (Coordinator and UCA). Many of these members have served this Committee and ministry for several years and their wisdom, insight and assistance are greatly appreciated.

2.3 National Cooperation

Disaster and Recovery Ministries is a member of AVECA (Australian Volunteer Emergency Chaplaincy Alliance) which is associated with the National Council of Churches in Australia. 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 continue 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.

AVECA is pleased to be hosting another visit to Australia by Dr Naomi Paget, a well-known international 'expert' in disaster chaplaincy, whose training both face-to-face and online, has been much appreciated in previous visits to Australia. Whilst her itinerary will not include Adelaide this time, D&RM chaplains are being encouraged to participate in the online opportunities provided during October.

A series of AVECA Task Groups is working on different strategies and projects in order to further the work of AVECA across the country. D&RM SA Coordinator Wendy Perkins is currently the Secretary of AVECA.

3. Forward Thinking

The excellent reputation of chaplains amongst other SA Government staff, volunteers and clients has grown in recent years but must never be taken for granted. We continue to seek to improve the skills, capacity and confidence of our team in order to maintain the respect for and relevance of D&RM as part of the State Emergency Management Plan.

Long-term financial sustainability of this ministry continues to be a challenge. Opportunities to seek grants and additional funding are very limited, time-consuming and often unsuccessful.

We continue to look for opportunities to deploy chaplains to serve local communities during stressful or difficult times where grief and trauma affect a large number of people.

Maintaining enthusiasm and morale amongst such a large team of volunteers is also challenging, especially when there has not been a significant deployment for some time. We also continue to seek to engage potential new chaplains from CALD communities and from other major faith groups, in order to better reflect the multifaith and multicultural wider community in our state.

Local congregations are also encouraged and challenged to consider and plan for how they can support their own local community in the event of a disaster on their doorstep. There are resources available to assist churches to have this conversation ahead of time.

Most of these forward-thinking initiatives would be greatly assisted if there were more resources available for staffing in order to grow the ministry in the future.

Wendy Perkins

Coordinator, Disaster and Recovery Ministries SA

May 2026



The Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of South Australia