



Disaster & Recovery Ministries SA Report

Since Black Summer 2019-2020 and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have not been any significant disasters in South Australia and therefore no deployments of our team of volunteer Disaster & Recovery Ministries chaplains. However, throughout the year we have continued to expand our team by training some new chaplains from a variety of faith backgrounds, as well as conducting refresher training for many existing chaplains in order to maintain their accreditation with us. Our chaplaincy team is well placed to respond if and when the need arises across our state in coming months.

1. Who are we and what do 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 300 people trained for this ministry across SA 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 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.

2. Summary of Key Activities since February 2021

2.1 Training and Resourcing

Since our team is now blessed with good numbers (although some regional areas could always use more), 2021 was a year of consolidation. Many chaplains across the state were in need of refresher training and we were pleased to be able to offer that in regional centres – Jamestown, Barmera, Port Lincoln, Streaky Bay, and Mount Gambier, as well as closer to home in Seacliff, Bridgewater and Tea Tree Gully. In conjunction with these, we also gathered chaplains together from across their own regions with informal regional meetings and/or a meal together in Berri, Murray Bridge, Whyalla and Minlaton. As expected, the ongoing pandemic interfered with our plans, especially at Jamestown where only part of the full 2-day training course was completed before a snap lockdown brought that to a swift end. (Hopefully that course will be completed soon!) The sense of teamwork and camaraderie which develops at such gatherings and training events is a vital aspect of this ministry as it builds stronger relationships which are essential when working together under the stressful conditions of an Emergency Relief Centre in the aftermath of a disaster.

Chaplains also had the opportunity in June 2021 to participate in two high-quality online courses conducted by Dr Naomi Paget, an international expert in disaster chaplaincy. Those who availed themselves of these courses (Psychological First Aid and Enhancing Resilience) were unanimous in their affirmation of the quality, relevance, usefulness, encouragement and inspiration they received from their participation, despite the challenges of the Zoom online format.

Disaster and Recovery Ministries chaplains are kept updated, informed and resourced by our online newsletter which has become increasingly important with such a widespread and diverse team.

Amongst the many challenges of COVID we have resolved to invite each chaplain to purchase their own D&RM-branded tabard in order to avoid the risks associated with sharing these items between chaplains. Thanks to some generous donations, we have also been able to provide these tabards to chaplains for whom the cost may be prohibitive.

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 recruiting, training, resourcing, deploying and the ongoing management of more than 300 volunteer

chaplains, as well as liaising with SA Government emergency management staff and other participating organisations on an ongoing basis. In addition there is an Administration Assistant employed on a casual basis as needed (currently Helen Birch) who provides invaluable support to the Coordinator and team across a range of different administrative tasks.

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 Philip Gardner (chair), Jan Trengove (UCA), Rev Peter Miller (Lutheran), Tim Wells (Lutheran and Schools Ministry Group), Peter Skurray (SMG), Rev Susan Straub (Anglican) 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 is greatly appreciated.

2.3 National Co-operation

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 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.

The annual national meeting of UCA coordinators of chaplaincy teams and disaster support initiatives was held online in 2021 to share information and encourage one another. These meetings are always encouraging and beneficial.

3. Forward Thinking

We continue 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 another year dominated by a global pandemic have been felt in our inability to gather people together physically together for ongoing training and regional meetings. We continue to make the best use we can of the relevant technology to meet and train people online and in some ways, this has been a bonus and enabled more people to participate with minimal travel and disruption. However our preference remains to meet and train chaplains face-to-face, at least for their initial training course.

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 continue in 2022 and beyond.

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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