

Synod '24



Disaster & 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 250 people trained, accredited and active in this ministry across South Australia 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.

2. Key Activities Since June 2023

2.1 Riverland flood

D&RM volunteer chaplains supported the Riverland communities affected by the significant flooding from late November 2022 until the end of June 2023. More than 100 chaplains willingly filled daily rosters to provide pastoral and spiritual support in Emergency Relief Centres in Berri, Mannum and Murray Bridge, in Recovery Centres in these same towns as well as in other smaller communities on an occasional basis. Chaplains also attended community meetings over the course of these seven months, which was our longest continuous deployment for at least 10 years. It was a massive commitment on everyone's part but very well received by all.

The following statistics summarise our deployment:

- Almost 840 shifts were attended by D&RM volunteer chaplains
- 105 individual chaplains were involved, some serving only 1 shift, but 1 chaplain served 40 shifts across the region.
- Each chaplain involved served an average of roughly 8 shifts
- The total number of hours served by D&RM chaplains was close to 4,200 hours. Based on a nominal figure of \$30/hour (average community support worker wage in Australia), this represents about \$126,000 of volunteer contribution to the flood-affected communities of SA, or \$100,000 at minimum wage level.
- In addition to these hours, the Coordinator worked long hours, above and beyond the 0.4FTE paid position, in order to resource, prepare, roster, facilitate overnight handovers, informally debrief and communicate with the chaplains as well as with SA Housing staff.
- Whilst the bulk of our shifts were filled by locally-based chaplains wherever possible, chaplains from as far afield as Whyalla, Port Lincoln, Port Pirie, Yorke Peninsula and Clare, as well as many from the greater Adelaide region put up their hands to travel to Berri, Mannum and Murray Bridge in order to serve the communities affected by this flooding disaster.

Disaster and Recovery Ministries felt privileged to be invited to serve the community affected by the Riverland flooding disaster. Even though the level of trauma was significantly less and different to that experienced by those affected by bushfires, the chaplains still felt that they had something to contribute to the people who passed through Centres, seeking practical help, advice and psycho-social support. There were many positive comments about the caring and compassionate way in which clients were handled by SA Government staff, the efficiency of the Centres and the positive experience they afforded to clients and volunteers present. The role and presence of chaplains seems to be better understood by all involved in staffing and running the Centres, which is pleasing to see. Chaplains felt they were warmly welcomed on most occasions and appreciated the flexibility to help out wherever it was needed, especially if there were gaps which were not being filled by other agencies on occasions. Feedback from clients was encouraging too, with comments about feeling valued, heard and assisted wherever possible.

2.2 Training and resourcing

We continue to provide training courses for potential new chaplains (8 courses during 2024) as well as refresher course for existing chaplains, who are required to complete this once every 3 years. These courses are run in suburban, rural and regional areas and are often hosted by UC congregations. We are very grateful to these congregations across the state and to UCLT and SMG who host these training days for us. 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.

In order to streamline our communication between the operations team and chaplains, we have transitioned to the use of the DR Chaplain app and have run a couple of mock/desktop exercises to test its capability and to ensure that chaplains are proficient in its use before we need to use it for a real deployment. This has been a significant step for our ministry and for individual chaplains.

2.3 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 300 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. 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), Peter Skurray (SMG), 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.

2.4 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.

A series of 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 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

Co-ordinator, Disaster and Recovery Ministries SA

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The Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of South Australia