16th Assembly
Dwelling in love

muylathina takila-ti   Le:wun tunk-ungai tuldangk tunk-ungai
Ola ma tumau i le alofa'   사랑 안에서 살기   Tinggal di dalam Kasih
Nofoma'u i he Ofa   愛中合居

NATIONAL DISASTER RECOVERY
(UNITING DISASTER RECOVERY)

1.   INTRODUCTION

Disasters have always been a feature of the Australian landscape. "Droughts and flooding rains" along with bushfires are understood as part and parcel of living in this land. Unfortunately, due to climate change we are seeing a rise in the severity and frequency of disastrous weather events.

The Black Summer of 2019/20 was the worst bushfire season in recorded history, we are seeing records set in regard to heatwave (the greatest killer of all disasters), cyclones are landing further south than ever before, and tornados are increasing in number. Since the last meeting of the Assembly, Australia has seen the impact of the worst drought since the Federation Drought of last century), bushfire and floods, the COVID pandemic and mouse plague.

There is no evidence that these events will slow down into the future and, in each case, the Uniting Church seeks, where possible, to assist in the healing of disaster-affected communities.

2.   THE BACKGROUND TO THIS MINISTRY

The Uniting Church has been engaged in supporting communities in disaster since union. The intentional formation of a national ministry for preparation and response to disaster as a national ministry under the Assembly occurred with the induction of the National Disaster Recovery Officer (NDRO) in 2013. This was made possible from an approach made by the Synod of NSW & ACT with the support of other Synods and the Assembly itself. Since then, it has been operating under the umbrella term "Uniting Disaster Recovery".

3.   BASIC PURPOSE

The purpose of the National Disaster Recovery Officer role, and by extension, Uniting Disaster Recovery is:

To develop resources, networks and support mechanisms to aid the ministry agents, congregations and agencies of the church to effectively respond to natural and other disasters across Australia.

4.   WAYS IN WHICH THE MINISTRY IS EXPRESSED

Since 2013 the NDRO has worked to develop resources and to grow ever-widening networks engaged in disaster preparation, response and recovery:

4.1   Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy

Every State and Territory in Australia has its own emergency management legislation and welfare response plans. Ecumenical disaster recovery chaplaincy networks have become an important element of interagency response to evacuation and recovery centres in nearly every Australian jurisdiction. The UCA has played an important part in this, most recently supported and resourced by Uniting Disaster Recovery. The UCA in Victoria started what is now the VCCEM in the 1970s, in NSW the Uniting Church oversees the (NSW) Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network (DRCN) and the South Australian Disaster and Recovery Ministries (D&RMSA). The UCA is also the key partner of the NTCC's Northern Territory Emergency Response Chaplaincy Service (NTRCS) supporting this through the Northern Synod Office, and the ACTDRCN operates hand in glove with its sister service the NSWDRCN. Apart from the VCCEM in Victoria and the TCCEM in Tasmania (both of which he works closely with) the NDRO has been working at resourcing, supporting, and running training courses for all of these ministries.

Most recently, the NDRO has been working with key coordinators, allied to the Synods in WA and Qld, to further the work of developing DR chaplaincy networks in these states. The WA Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network was formed as a cooperative venture of the Synod and the WA

Council of Churches (CCWA). Stephen Robinson has conducted the training for these and worked with the coordinators of this new network over the past three years.

The Australian Volunteer Emergency Chaplaincy Alliance (AVECA) has been formed as a network of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). The NDRO is Secretary of this body and has been actively engaged in furthering the work of this Alliance which brings a national vision and approach to policy, ethics, training and practice for volunteer ecumenical emergency and disaster relief chaplaincy across Australia.

4.2   Research and development of training material:

Disaster welfare is a constantly evolving and emerging field which requires good training resources based on real and dynamic events. Each major disaster event reveals needs of people, and corresponding needs for training to meet those needs. Using funding from the NSW Government some world-class training materials have been developed by the NSW Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network (DRCN) team. These have been able to be adapted and used across Australia and the Pacific and include the following:

Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy, Team Leadership, Logistics and Duty Officer Training, Peer Support, Supporting Ministry Agents in Crisis, Grief Following Disasters, Domestic and Family Violence Awareness for Carers, View to Recovery (based on interviews with ministers who have been with communities beyond fire and flood disasters), Bread for the Journey (sustaining healthy ministry for the long run), suicide prevention, intervention and postvention. Into the future there is a real interest in developing a range of other materials including support for, and cooperation with, indigenous Australians following disasters. Rev. Dr. Stephen Robinson has been awarded a Churchill Fellowship to (when COVID allows) travel to Indonesia, New Zealand and the USA to study "Faith leaders' responses to violent attacks on houses of worship." The latter is an example of how the work of trauma ministry extends beyond the traditional response to only natural disasters.

4.3   Training

During the past triennium, the team has worked to run courses – particularly chaplaincy, peer support, and team leadership training, for the disaster recovery chaplaincy networks in NSW, the ACT, SA, Qld, WA and the NT.

The NDRO has worked with an exciting new initiative of UnitingCare in Qld, running disaster recovery chaplaincy training across the state.

Recently, some good connections have occurred with the Adult Educators network and presbyteries in the VICTAS Synod and it is anticipated that this will open up ministry training and support there as well.

4.4   Peer Support

Peer Support may be defined as "the help and support that people, with lived experience, are able to give to one another."

Peer support following disaster or traumatic events may be provided by ministry agents who are, before the event, selected and trained in trauma ministry, disaster recovery processes and techniques of supporting ministers in crisis. These peers are available to come alongside disaster-affected ministry agents, congregations or presbyteries to bring a listening ear, pastoral care and strategic support in times of crisis. Over some years, Uniting Disaster Recovery has been involved in running peer support training in the Synods of NSW & ACT, WA, SA and Qld. An established peer team has been operating in NSW following up on the impacts of the Black Summer fires and the March 2021 floods. Peer support was also provided to Uniting Church school chaplains following the deaths of school family members in the White Island volcanic eruption in New Zealand. Queensland Synod is working on developing a peer support network as part of its disaster response strategy.

4.5   Interventions

The NDRO has been a resource to the church following disasters to provide resources or bring support to individual ministry agents, presbyteries, church agencies or synods as they seek to respond to the recovery need. Most recently these have been fire, cyclone and flood events across a number of states and territories.

4.6 Establishing Disaster Recovery Ministry Roles

Following disasters, the needs of locals are often intensified in the time after all the services have begun to withdraw. The period of 3 to 12 or more months after disaster strikes, is often described as the 'disillusionment phase' of disaster recovery, where people feel the depth of their loss and community support breaks down. During this time, the church is challenged to release resources from its Synod and National disaster funds to create short to medium term disaster recovery roles within affected communities.

Since the devastating 'Black Summer' fires and floods of 2019/20 the Canberra Region Presbytery has been engaged in several recovery initiatives on the South Coast of NSW, including part time recovery ministry roles across three parish areas.

This year, the WA Synod has responded to the Gidgegannup Fires and Tropical Cyclone Seroja's impact through its Recovery Working Group in partnership with Frontier Services Bush Chaplains and the newly formed WA Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network. They are currently working on placing a recovery ministry person, part-time in the Gidgegannup Community.

In NSW, the Mid North Coast and Paramatta Nepean Presbyteries' areas were heavily impacted by major flooding in March this year. They are both working on plans to have disaster recovery chaplaincy roles for some months into the communities they serve. All of these have been assisted by the Assembly's Disaster Recovery Ministries with consultation and the development of role descriptions, processes, support and connections to funding.

4.7 The National Disaster Relief Fund

During this triennium, the terms of reference for the management committee of the Assembly National Disaster Relief Fund has been revisited and revised by the Assembly Standing Committee. The committee is now more nationally representative, smaller in size and more able to respond to requests for funding as required. The NDRO sits on this committee as a non-voting member, to bring advice.

5. PARTNERSHIPS

In keeping with the role of supporting the Uniting Church and its agencies to prepare for and respond to disasters, the NDRO works with a range of councils and agencies of the church:

5.1 Synods

As already indicated, Uniting Disaster Recovery has been engaged with most of the UCA Synods on a regular basis. The NDRO attends meetings of the Synod Disaster Recovery Committees of Qld, WA and NSW & ACT and acts as a consultant and advisor for responses and initiatives to all Synods as they require this. SA Synod has also made use of the NDRO for strategic and policy advice.

5.2 Presbyteries

Disaster-affected presbyteries connect with the NDRO in terms of pre-disaster planning and, after disasters can be – through this contact – provided with resources, liturgies, recovery strategies and recovery role descriptions. As mentioned above, it is primarily the presbyteries which initiate new disaster recovery ministry roles. The NDRO remains available for coaching and debriefing those involved in this recovery work. At this time, the NDRO is having conversations along these lines with the WA, Parramatta Nepean, Canberra Region and Mid North Coast Presbyteries.

5.3 Work with UCA Agencies:

Where Uniting Churches are on the ground in disaster affected areas, Uniting Disaster Recovery seeks to connect their people and work increase their effectiveness in the work.

Frontier Services has a real interest in disaster recovery, given the need of many they serve who are affected by drought, fire, flood and plague. The NDRO often connects with their bush chaplains bringing resources and direct support and has also helped the Outback Links volunteer programs connect to the most disaster-affected areas and government agencies operating there. Following the fires and cyclone in WA this year, the NDRO worked with the WA Disaster and Recovery Working Group as they brought Bush Chaplain Lindsay Ginn alongside the fire damaged district of

Gidgegannup. The NDRO has also worked within the Remote Ministries Working Group given these ongoing shared connections.

UnitingCare and church missions are often engaged in communities which are disaster affected. Where this happens, Uniting Disaster Recovery seeks to ensure that these agencies are connected and supported as is possible. The NDRO has been involved in making connections with UnitingCare's partnership with Target's Christmas Appeal which has provided vouchers to disaster-affected households in Queensland and NSW.

UnitingWorld has involved the NDRO in a number of projects over the years in response to natural disasters in the Pacific. In 2019 he travelled to PNG to meet with a gathering of pastors from six provinces affected by the devastating earthquake and landslips, running a recovery workshop to assist the churches in their response to the disaster.

Building on work started in Tonga and Fiji, this year a comprehensive project of UnitingWorld supported the development or establishment of national disaster recovery chaplaincy networks in Tonga, Fiji, Kiribati and Tuvalu. The training for these, undertaken by Zoom, was based on the work developed in Australia, but adapted by our church partners with translations, Pacific-developed devotions and theologians and a strong element of safeguarding. The NDRO will provide an ongoing role of 'coaching' the trainers and key leaders of these networks into the future.

One of the most exciting elements of the development of these chaplaincy networks is their use in connecting with and supporting communities affected by the economic and other impacts of the COVID pandemic in these countries.

6.   REPOSITIONING OF THE MINISTRY INTO THE FUTURE…

After eight years of operating from the Assembly Office, Uniting Disaster Recovery will be moving. From 1 July 2021 the National Disaster Recovery Ministry will operate within the framework of the National Collaboration Initiatives (NCI). From this time, the Synod of NSW and ACT will be supporting and expanding the work of Uniting Disaster Recovery. The NDRO will continue in his national role supported by another staff member working with the NSW Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network. This has taken place to ensure that the ministry operates well into the future, supported by investments made by the Synod for this purpose, operating out of the 9th Level of 222 Pitt Street, Sydney.

Rev Dr Stephen Robinson
National Disaster Recovery Officer