B22 DISASTER RECOVERY

1. BACKGROUND

A disaster is “a serious disruption to community life which threatens death or injury in that community and/or damage to property which is beyond the day-to-day capacity of the prescribed statutory authorities and which requires special mobilisation and organisation of resources other than those normally available to those authorities.” (Emergency Management Australia). Essentially these are events which overwhelm the capacity of a community to cope, requiring support from beyond. For the Church and its agents disasters are points of great need and opportunity to bring substantial and important ministry. The National Disaster Recovery Officer (NDRO) is an important resource to and beyond the Church as we care for people and communities following disasters and traumatic events.

The position of National Disaster Recovery Officer was established in 2013. It is a role which is funded from beyond the normal Assembly budget through contributions from a number of Synods (the chief of these being the NSW/ACT Synod which carries particular responsibilities) combined with grants from the National Disaster Relief Fund. Funding for disaster recovery chaplaincy training in NSW is supported by a Government grant through the NSW/ACT Synod. The NDRO’s role exists to support Synods, Presbyteries, Congregations and Agencies of the Uniting Church in response for and recovery from disasters and community crises.

Rev. Dr Stephen Robinson has been in this role from its inception as a ministry placement on a basis of three-year rounds. He is currently approaching the last year of the second three-year term (which will finish at the end of July 2019) and there will need to be some discussions with Synods and the Assembly to consider a further three-year funding of this role. The position is based within the Assembly Office in Sydney.

2. ALLOCATION OF TIME

The NDRO operates on a basis of 30% of time being given to, and funded from, the NSW/ACT Synod (with particular responsibility of being Synod Disaster Recovery Coordinator and Coordinator of the NSW Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network [DRCN]), 10% of time given to UnitingWorld for projects of disaster preparation training and recovery/response in the Pacific, and the rest shared across the church nationally. Rev. Dr Robinson has worked in the coordinating role in NSW for more than 10 years, and this has proved invaluable in developing resources which have been refined and used across Australia and into the Pacific.

3. FUNCTIONS

Disaster Management is generally understood in an ongoing cycle. The elements of the cycle are Prevention, Preparedness (Impact), Response, Recovery. The NDRO works across all of these depending on the circumstances.

3.1 PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS

This is constant, and includes learning lessons from past and recent disasters, creating protocols, policies, gathering resources, training, enhancing networks and building the Church’s capacity to meet possible needs. A large part of this is developing and using
training material and assisting in developing UCA and ecumenical networks ready to respond to crisis. The NDRO continues to regularly run training and education sessions and connect with a strong network of UCA Recovery Coordinators in each Synod (apart from Victoria and Tasmania where there is no Synod coordinator for disaster recovery).

Each year the NDRO has hosted a two-day meeting of UCA Synod Disaster Recovery Coordinators – this has been supported by the National Disaster Recovery Fund – the meeting includes lessons learned from disaster ministry from the previous year, sharing resources and building connections. The NDRO has helped Synods develop Disaster Response Committees (where they are present) establish terms of reference, policies and protocols.

3.2 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

When a disaster strikes a community anywhere in Australia, or in the life of our Pacific church partners, the NDRO is a resource available to assist in a number of ways, chiefly in consultation and assisting prepared networks in situ, pastoral support of ministry agents (peer support), strategising with the lead Church, NGO and Government Agencies as well as Synods or Presbyteries in the affected area. In the recovery phase the NDRO may also assist Presbyteries, Synods or Congregations in conducting training within the area and in their organising special recovery ministry roles such as Presbytery Long Supply or embedded disaster recovery chaplaincy. The NDRO also assists in facilitating connection to the Assembly’s National Disaster Relief Funds or to Synod Disaster Relief Funds where they exist.

4. SPECIFIC PROJECTS AND RESPONSES

4.1 PEER SUPPORT

Peer support work involves developing networks (usually through Synods) of ministry agents trained to support other ministry agents following disasters or community crisis. The NDRO conducts this training in NSW/ACT, WA, Northern, QLD and SA Synods. These networks help to build resilience beyond a disaster – creating capacity to support churches and ministry agents at crisis points in their community’s life, such as at the death of significant leaders or single tragic events such as murder-suicides or deaths through housefires.

4.2 DISASTER RECOVERY CHAPLAINCY

Each State and Territory in Australia has its own emergency management legislation and Welfare Response Plans. Ecumenical Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy has become accepted as an important part of interagency response to evacuation centres in many Australian jurisdictions. The UCA has played an important part in this.

In Victoria, the UCA started what is now the Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry (VCCEM). In NSW we oversee the NSW Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network (DRCN) and in South Australia we oversee Disaster and Recovery Ministries (D&RMSA).

The UCA is also a very strong supporter of the Northern Territory Emergency Response Chaplaincy Service (NTRCS) through the Northern Synod Office. With the exception of
the VCCEM (which he works closely with) the NDRO has been working at supporting each of these ministries, as well as helping to establish the ACT DRCN.

The NDRO also works with key coordinators, allied to the Synods in WA and QLD, to further the work of developing Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Networks in these states. See more information on this in Section 5 of this report on AVECA.

4.3 ASSISTING IN ESTABLISHING RECOVERY MINISTRY ROLES

When a disaster strikes a community, the recovery needs are great and protracted. This often occurs in communities with a lay-led team ministry which is stretched to support ministry needs beyond the Church.

The NDRO has been able to work with Synod Coordinators and Presbyteries to assist them in establishing a recovery role in such situations and have these funded from a combination of Synod and National Disaster Relief Funds. Examples of this are: Coonabarabran Bushfires (NSW), Pinery Fires (SA), Cyclone Debbie (QLD) and, most recently, Tathra Bushfires (NSW). Each of these recovery roles builds resources and lessons which assist in the establishment of others as they become necessary.

4.4 CONNECTION WITH FRONTIER SERVICES

Having the NDRO operating from the Assembly Offices has enabled connection and resourcing of various parts of the Assembly’s work beyond pure disaster preparation and response. A valuable ongoing relationship has been established with Frontier Services; in particular connecting to bush chaplains in drought-affected areas, helping incorporate them into disaster recovery networks and working to connect them to recovery funds for disaster and drought-affected people. Positive discussions continue on how to integrate Outback Links in the recovery of disaster-affected communities such as Leadville in NSW following the Sir Ivan Fires of 2017.

4.5 INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

The NDRO has worked with UnitingWorld in assisting our Pacific Partners ahead of and following disasters in these nations. This includes the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu following Tropical Cyclone (TC) Pam, Tonga following TC Winston, Fiji following TC Gita.

In Tonga, Fiji and Tuvalu the NDRO has assisted these nations to train and develop ecumenical Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Networks. These have had significant impact on the Church’s capacity to engage with need in communities, most especially in Tonga in the wake of TC Gita earlier this year. It is anticipated that the NDRO will shortly be visiting and supporting the church carers in the PNG Highlands following the recent devastating earthquake and landslips.

5. AVECA: A NEW NATIONAL INITIATIVE

In 2011/12, prior to the establishment of the NDRO position, Rev. Dr Robinson was on a working group for the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) examining issues related to national processes and standards for disaster recovery chaplaincy. He and the coordinator or VCCEM, Stuart Stuart, were asked by the NCCA Executive to further the work of building state networks of disaster recovery chaplaincy and national cooperation.
The establishment of the NDRO position has allowed Rev. Dr Robinson to help do this as new networks were trained and added to most states and territories. In November 2017 a new peak national body for this work was established in the Australian Volunteer Emergency Chaplaincy Alliance (AVECA). This was established as a network of the NCCA and gives national representation to the work of Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy of which the UCA is a key player. Rev. Dr Robinson is the interim Secretary of this alliance.

6. THE FUTURE

The NDRO continues to plan and resource for ministry in the most difficult circumstances. These are situations where people are the most vulnerable and most needing the love and support of the church, and a ministry of hope beyond the present loss and despair. Please continue to support and pray for the ministry of the National Disaster Recovery Officer and the many people who share in this work across and beyond the Uniting Church in Australia.

Rev. Dr Stephen Robinson
Assembly National Disaster Recovery Officer