



The Uniting Church in Australia  
QUEENSLAND SYNOD

# Good advice for churches, congregations and faith groups ministering in disaster-affected communities





Longreach, Queensland.

**Photo:** Rosemary Champion



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**Cover image:** Kariboe Creek, Central Queensland, 2015.

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# Introduction

Disaster can impact any community across Australia. People suddenly find themselves in great need, seeking help for their communities, their families and themselves.

The Australian religious community is diverse and incorporates many faiths and denominations. One of the things we have in common is the desire to respond to human need, particularly when people are affected by disaster and traumatic events.

As communities of worship and service, embedded in local neighbourhoods, people of faith are often strategically placed to respond to those who are suffering.

It is important to appreciate that there are many groups which take care of people in the midst of a disaster. Government agencies, volunteer groups and non-government organisations are tasked with the responsibility to respond in the event of an emergency or a disaster; these roles, responsibilities and protocols are detailed in the Queensland Disaster Management Arrangements (QDMA).

The QDMA “is a multi-tiered system of committees and coordination centres at state, district and local levels. These arrangements recognise that each level of the arrangements

must not only work collaboratively but in unison to ensure the effective coordination of planning, services, information and resources necessary for comprehensive disaster management.”<sup>1</sup>

Local disaster management plans (LDMP) detail the specific responsibilities of local government, agencies and non-government organisations and how the roles interact. Local government also has the task of communicating details of response and recovery to the local community.

While the QDMA aims to ensure that the community is cared for, there are still many opportunities for churches, congregations and faith groups to be involved.

Because every disaster is different, so too will every response be different. Churches and faith communities cannot simply “do their own thing”. They need to ensure their response is appropriate for the event and supportive of responses from other agencies. It is essential that churches and faith groups work under the disaster management umbrella. This will ensure that everyone’s response will be effective.

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<sup>1</sup> [disaster.qld.gov.au/About\\_disaster\\_management/Pages/Introduction-and-History.aspx](http://disaster.qld.gov.au/About_disaster_management/Pages/Introduction-and-History.aspx) accessed on 6 November 2017.

# What can churches and faith groups do?

## Before a disaster occurs

### Communication

Build a network of people who can be contacted in the event of a disaster. An up-to-date pastoral contact list is one of the most important tools for any church. After disasters, internet and power supply might be lost so remember to keep a updated printed contact list. Have at least one key person nominated to coordinate a crisis response.

Churches and faith communities often have wider denominational connections. Ensure that the church is able to contact the right people and have printed contact details and names on hand.

### Resources

Churches and faith groups should keep up-to-date details of their physical resources. These resources could include buildings and halls, storage space, kitchen, laundry, shower and toilet facilities, car parking and areas that could accommodate animals. Such information is key should a need arise.

This information may be shared with your council's Local Disaster Management Group. It is important to remember not to simply "create" an evacuation centre, but to offer what you have through the appropriate disaster welfare channels.



Easter Sunday at Severnlea Uniting Church.

**Photo:** Kaye Ronalds



# When a disaster occurs

## Immediate response

During and immediately following a crisis, it is essential that all the people from your church or group who are likely to be impacted are contacted, particularly those who are most likely to need help or have limited resources to take care of themselves. Early contact ensures that the network of connectedness is maintained. Sadly, there have been people who have experienced trauma who were ignored because someone thought that someone else would contact them.

Assess your resources. Check the availability of your church buildings. Ensure kitchen, toilet, laundry and shower facilities are fully supplied and storage areas are clear and so on.

Check with your denominational head office if emergency funds are available. Often church organisations hold donated funds for community disasters and emergencies. Find out how these funds are accessed.

If appropriate, use these funds to support local people and families. This may include food vouchers or hampers (preferably bought locally to help the local economy) or buying food to make meals to feed people or to give frozen meals to families. It is important to integrate your response with the authorised

coordinating agencies; there may be no point in providing free meals if the Salvation Army are already doing this. Vouchers need to be appropriately distributed in a way that is targeted and maintains each recipient's dignity. Checking with other agencies ensures that everyone is helped.

People who are displaced into motels or who have damaged kitchens are often unable to cook. A local church may be able to fund a freezer kept in a church facility for storing donated meals which then may be heated there or elsewhere.

Organise pastoral visits in the area. Reconnecting the community is best done by locals who know locals.

Organise practical help. Following disasters such as floods, fires or storms there is always an enormous clean-up to be done. It may involve helping to clean out debris, putting up fences, cleaning up homes or paddocks. Make certain that all volunteers have appropriate safety and protection.

## Pastoral response

People who have experienced trauma can be emotionally vulnerable, and church and faith groups must NEVER take advantage and attempt to recruit or evangelise at such times. The best way for churches and faith groups to respond is in a caring and practical manner.

Some local councils have in place specially trained disaster recovery chaplains authorised to work ecumenically and in a multi-faith environment. They are authorised to provide pastoral care in evacuation and recovery centres and disaster-affected areas. They are also available to consult with local churches and religious groups. The evacuation centre manager will be able to confirm if any disaster recovery chaplains are available.

Church worship and memorial services can be a wonderful support for communities in trauma. If your church or faith group is in or adjacent to an area impacted by disaster or trauma, there is an opportunity to provide (a) an appropriate ceremony (pastoral care service for the community). Faith groups are encouraged to combine for such services and to ensure that denominational and faith differences are put to one side for the wellbeing of the wider community.

Local churches and groups are encouraged to promote such services at evacuation or recovery centres.

Church and religious groups must not enter evacuation or recovery centres for religious or pastoral purposes without the permission of the centre manager. If disaster recovery chaplains are present, talk to them about what is appropriate.

Children are often overlooked. Think about organising activities or treats for the children in recovery centres, (but only after gaining the permission of parents and the centre manager's and parental permission). Ensure that people connecting with children have appropriate Working with Children checks.

Centre managers may call on agencies such as Save the Children or may use local childcare workers. If your church has children's workers or facilities available, let the manager know.



## Donations

Financial donations and vouchers are much more useful. People in need are then able to select and purchase items which are suitable for their circumstances. This also helps restore their wellbeing during a time of chaos. Your church may be able to help organise the collection of cash and vouchers from your community. If intending to do this, advise the local recovery coordinator or local committee to ensure collaboration.

To make a donation to the Queensland Synod Disaster Relief Fund please visit **[missionpossible.ucaqld.com.au](http://missionpossible.ucaqld.com.au)** or call **(07) 3377 9777**

To apply for a disaster relief grant for your local church and/or local community please email **[disaster.relief@ucaqld.com.au](mailto:disaster.relief@ucaqld.com.au)**

Donated goods can cause huge problems. While donating items makes people feel that they have assisted someone in need,

often the reality is that they have actually added to the difficulty.

Church halls can be filled and rendered useless for months or years if churches accept donated goods, and thousands of hours of volunteer time wasted on near worthless donations.

Second-hand furniture, clothing, linen, appliances and children's items are often not needed and in the past have had to be dumped. Out-of-date food cannot be distributed.

Appropriate new items can be a great help only if they address people's immediate needs. Those who have lost their homes due to a disaster do not have any facilities to store large donated items. Material items are best donated through agencies like GIVIT **[givit.org.au](http://givit.org.au)**

You can use social media such as Facebook to let the wider community know if there are any specific needs



**Photo:** Kathie Nichols/Shutterstock.com

in your community, for example for clean-up tools and products. Preferably this should be done in one place for the whole community.

## **Disaster response: Who does what?**

Under QDMA, management of a disaster at the community level is conducted by local governments who are responsible for the development and implementation of their Local Disaster Management Plan (LDMP).

Under the local plan, police, fire services and the SES have operational responsibilities when responding to an emergency or disaster. The local plan will arrange for government and non-government organisations to respond to community needs.

Please take the time to read and understand your LDMP, available on your local council's website. Each local council may have different arrangements.

Often a recovery committee will be set up by local council and it is important to seek a place for a representative from local faith groups. This person needs to be someone committed to keeping all the churches and faith groups informed of community needs, and helping local faith groups coordinate their resources. Congregations should feel free to meet with local council about membership of the recovery committee.





## Long-term recovery

As long-term members of the community, churches and faith groups can play a significant role in helping to restore the community as it recovers from a traumatic event.

Communities will inevitably go through a period of disillusionment. This occurs when the huge emphasis on helping others begins to wear off and the reality of what needs to be done to create a new future sets in. Disillusionment can start as soon as three weeks after the event and can last as long as a couple of years.

Often people are focused on getting their own lives back together and don't have time for others. Church-organised community or group activities (such as a regular craft group) can help build personal resilience through being with others who have shared a similar experience.

Organising community events that give people a break can be of great benefit. Social events reconnect people and remind them that they are not alone.

Helping organise a community project can be another way of bringing people together. It may be rebuilding a community area, setting up a memorial or restoring a park. Speak with the local council about your ideas.

Consider including teenagers in your events. This age group is often left out, but may be glad to contribute.

There are many areas where churches and faith groups can provide practical help: gardens, holidays, farm help, school tutoring, sports groups. What could your church do?

Ecumenical services on anniversaries can be helpful. While acknowledging the losses, such services need to focus on looking forward and celebration. It is important that the services not re-traumatise those attending by exclusively dwelling on the pain of the event.



Longreach, Queensland.

**Photo:** Rosemary Champion

## Some final advice

Each community is different and what works in one place may not work in another. It is hoped that this information will provide insight into how disasters and emergencies are managed, and how you can prepare your church or faith group to not only cope in an emergency but to assist in the process of response and recovery. The Synod office can put you in touch with people who can help you plan.

For **general questions** please contact us on:

**1300 822 753**  
**[ucaqld.com.au/contact-us](http://ucaqld.com.au/contact-us)**

