

Australian churches come together in flood crisis

by [Matt Fenwick](#)

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Canberra, January 14 (ENInews)--As northern Australia suffers the worst flooding in more than 30 years, Australian churches have moved rapidly to respond to the community's urgent needs. Flooding has continued to build since late December with flood waters covering an area the size of Germany and France combined. Sixteen people are now confirmed dead, with 53 missing and more than 200,000 people stranded. Local church leaders who spoke with ENInews on 13 January said they are dealing with the immediate effects of the crisis.

"Right now, we're in the emergency phase," said the Rev. Les Nixon, leader of Outback Patrol, a mission organisation that aims to evangelise Australia's outback. Outback Patrol's pilots are ready to fly in supplies to cut-off areas, but must wait until flood waters recede.

Some Outback Patrol volunteers are already in flood zones, working with local authorities. "One of my people just emailed me and said that he'd been out with police and they'd just recovered a body in Lockyer Valley," Nixon said.

Local churches are serving as emergency evacuation centres. In some areas, this has been part of the government response. Moree Uniting Church, south of the worst-affected areas, is providing back-up accommodation, as well as pastoral support. The Rev. Robert Buchan, a trained disaster recovery chaplain, and a minister for the Moree area, is working closely with local government social services.

Buchan said that much of his role as a chaplain is meeting people's immediate needs. "A lot of what I'm doing is providing information - telling people where the local supermarket is, driving them there. People are too numb for serious discussion. I'll be interested to see what may happen as the days unfold and they're still not able to go back to their homes. That might be the time they begin to talk about deeper issues."

Other churches have responded to needs spontaneously. The Rev. Heather Griffin is the minister at Sherwood Uniting Church, a suburb of Brisbane next to a flooded river. "It's a surreal feeling," she said. "All the main roads are covered in water in every direction. You see these beautiful sunsets reflected in the water, and then you see the rooftops poking out."

Several nights ago, Griffin found a man sleeping in a car in the church car park. "I asked him if he wanted to come into the church building for shelter. Before I went to bed, I opened up the building and turned the light on, so anyone who wanted to could come. When I went in the next morning, we had a dozen people sleeping in there."

Griffin's church is currently sheltering 25 people. The church has only one shower, and is getting electricity from a generator belonging to Griffin's husband. Griffin described children huddled round a television in one room watching DVDs, while adults watched the news in another room. "People are generally very positive," she said. "When they first got here, they just kept saying 'we're so grateful - what can we do?' It's only when they call their families that they get teary."

Other denominations have also offered their churches as emergency relief centres, including Catholic parishes in Ipswich, an inland city in the state of Queensland. "It's symbolic that people are finding their church to be a place of refuge," said David McGovern, Brisbane director of Catholic Mission, an overseas aid organisation. Churches in many countries that Catholic Mission has supported in the past are now contacting Australian churches to offer support and solidarity.

Like many church leaders ENInews contacted, McGovern has found it difficult to respond to the crisis when power to the Brisbane central business district is cut, communication lines are down and movement is severely restricted. "We're relying a lot on news coverage, and social media [such as Facebook] is really coming into its own," he said.

In the coming days, more regions are expected to be flooded as the water moves downstream. In the more northern areas, concerted disaster recovery efforts will begin as flood waters recede. Australian churches are working together to provide practical aid, and pastoral support. For example, the local Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran and Uniting churches in Toowoomba held an ecumenical service on 14 January. The council of churches in Victoria – a southern Australian state – have

contacted Queensland's ecumenical body offering to help prepare clergy in affected areas for counselling flood victims.

Other churches have less formal responses planned. Griffin of Sherwood Uniting said, "I told everyone here that when this is all over we'll have a big party. The next stage is going to be much more draining. That's where the letters of support really boost your morale. You know that God is with you through the voices."