

The Queensland Flood Crisis



Most of the population would by now be familiar with the magnitude of damage and distress resulting from the Queensland Flood Crisis over the past couple of weeks. What has stood out simultaneously though, is the magnitude of the Australian Spirit of strength and compassion. Anyone with proximity to the affected areas cannot escape the outpouring of civic consciousness and community compassion evident through the tens of thousands of volunteers and the comforting presence of the Australian Armed Forces. Coupled with this was the effort of rural and urban fire brigades, SES workers, and countless other emergency services personnel including the Police who laboured on shifts that has seen a 24/7 effort at recovery. Few nations around the globe would be able to boast such civilised behaviour and effective communal response.

Our own Church of St George decided early to harness this spirit and engage in an outreach to fellow citizens of every religion and identity. This has become a milestone for us as a Church community seeing its future as an authentic part of the fabric of the broader Australian landscape.

The Church responded to the immediate needs of our own people who were evacuated and arranged emergency accommodation with the generous help of many Church members. Emergency Assistance was made available 24/7 through telephone, internet, and social media. Our community facilities were offered to the relevant authorities for use as an emergency evacuation centre if needed.

As soon as the waters began to recede the church issued a call for volunteers through the internet, telephone, and social media. The youth of our Church responded overwhelmingly and we ended up with hundreds of volunteers in a matter of hours. A call was made for donations of food, water, cleaning products, gloves, masks, baby formula, baby nappies, medical supplies...the response again was unprecedented.

Volunteers were organised into teams for cleaning houses, streets, preparing food, feeding others, delivering supplies, and providing any possible support for emergency services personnel. These teams were sent to severely affected areas. They delivered assistance and supplies as far as the Ipswich evacuation centre.

At our biggest support station (operated out of the house of Parishioners Anthony and Nik-

ki Cassimatis who excelled in sacrifice and service) the church offered support for Australian Army personnel, Fire Brigade, SES workers, Police, and Council Workers by providing a rest station, food, water, coffee, (and free cigarettes may I add). The station was operational for 2 weeks in the aftermath of the floods.

Donations of School supplies were collected for schools in lower income flood affected areas and distributed through the Qld Attorney General's electoral office and that of the Premier. A great joy was walking the streets with food and water freely offering them to people and in particular to the soldiers and volunteers.

At the evening English Liturgy on Saturday 15 January Prayer was offered for victims and volunteers. This was a wonderful and special Liturgy attended by hundreds who came despite the devastation. It was also special to have praying with us, our State Attorney-General (Hon Cameron Dick), and the Qld Shadow Treasurer (Mr Timothy Nichols). The people were comforted by the unity of purpose displayed by all sides of politics coming together.

The fatherly support of our Archbishop was deeply felt. The Archdiocesan national collection for the "Qld Flood Appeal" brought a feeling of support from the Greek Orthodox of our nation.

Our church plan after the immediate crisis phase is to work with the "evolving story" and see where our people can be of most assistance. For example, several professional Social Workers from the parish have offered their services for trauma counselling and outreach. We are also considering a post crisis phase "adopt a family to look after" project.

What else can I say? People opened their homes, gave of their food and drink, laboured in horrible conditions of mud, water, and stench, prayed, comforted the afflicted with soothing words of encouragement, and exceeded the limits of customary generosity in helping others. I saw teenage boys and girls become men and women (including my sons and the sons and daughters of many parishioners) working with strength and honour and civic consciousness. I am deeply humbled by the response of the Orthodox people of Brisbane who matched and added to that of the broader community. Never before have I felt so intensely proud to be Orthodox and Australian. This event has transformed us in so many ways!

Father Dimitri Tsakas