

The cooperative spirit of chaplains in mission

Chaplains are an integral part of the total wellbeing support provided to the hundreds of police and defence personnel stationed in Timor-Leste, AFP International Deployment Group Chaplain Roger O'Donnell said after a recent visit to the troubled nation.

Roger joined several Australian Defence Force chaplains in Dili in June to support police and military personnel posted to the region.

"The civil unrest in the area has resulted in horrific deaths and the destruction of dozens of residential and commercial buildings in and around Dili, and support for those members sent in to assist is vital," he said.

There were more than 200 AFP members in Timor-Leste, a nation which, Roger observes, has seen its share of tragedy, instability and turmoil in recent years.

"Waking up to the sound of the caterpillar track vehicles (Armoured Personnel Carriers or APCs) and Blackhawk helicopters hovering overhead is a bit unnerving at first," he said. "The number of armed military on the ground has certainly stabilised things to some extent. At this time in the predominantly Catholic country,



AFP Chaplain Roger O'Donnell, at right, with Australian Defence Force Chaplain Ken Schmidt at the Army Barracks in Dili in June.

there are still a lot of camps for the thousands of displaced persons, particularly in 'safe' locations around the airport and at the Don Bosco seminary, and tent settlements have sprung up in parks, in church grounds and in some places, alongside the roadside.

"It's comforting to see regular emergency food supplies arrive. The chaplains participated in community and capacity enhancing programs through schools and church groups whenever possible. There has always been excellent cooperation between the AFP and Australian Defence Force chaplains. >

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"This cooperation was seen in recent times after the tragic murder of AFP officer Adam Dunning in the Solomon Islands in late 2004 and the accidental death of Private Jamie Clark in mid-2005, also in the Solomon Islands. These occasions demanded the utmost pastoral sensitivity, and the ongoing ministry to family and friends is quite extensive in time and locations.

"Sunday services are regularly conducted in the various mission deployments, or for specific occasions such as Anzac Day or memorial and remembrance services," he said.

Before his departure for Timor-Leste, Roger had attended the Solomon Islands to provide welfare support to members in the aftermath of the April riots. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) contingent had grown from 300 to more than 800 police, military and support personnel during this period, and the morale and spiritual wellbeing of members was aided by the AFP and Defence chaplains.

Roger, who is a former 20 year Navy Vietnam veteran, has been with the IDG for more than two years. He is a full-time AFP chaplain, and if he is not travelling, he is based at Majura, Canberra. His home-base liturgy is St Christopher's Cathedral in Canberra.

Chaplaincy in the AFP

There are five chaplains with the AFP: David Cockram (Perth, part-time), Gayl Mills (ACT), Roger O'Donnell (IDG), Gary

Stone (Brisbane, part-time) and Muslim Chaplain, Sheikh Khalil Chami. In 2002, Khalil became the first Moslem Chaplain (part-time) for the NSW Police, and was also the first Moslem Chaplain to the AFP.

Gayl Mills is based at the AFP College in Barton, Canberra, and said chaplaincy with the AFP is a rewarding and important role.

"People often ask me what the chaplains do. Chaplains carry out a range of duties including the traditional pastoral services such as weddings, baptisms and funerals, as well as giving spiritual guidance and direction," she said. "These are all offered by the AFP free of charge to AFP members and their close families.

We conduct services such as the Police Remembrance Day service on 29 September. Last year I attended a 'Women in Policing' conference in Darwin and conducted a service for about 20 people on the beautiful lawns of the esplanade opposite the hotel. We also attend Commissioner's Investiture ceremonies, the opening of recruit programs, and attestation ceremonies."

Gayl works closely with AFP Welfare Officers Andrew Warry, Sue Ross, and Neil Gallagher, and ACT psychologist Lacey Clews to offer individual and family welfare support.

"If I hear you're in hospital and I come to visit you, please don't be alarmed that everything must be much worse than you thought and they've sent the

Chaplain Roger O'Donnell in the centre for displaced persons after the Honiara riots in which hundreds of Chinese residents had their homes and livelihood destroyed in Chinatown.





Gayl Mills says AFP chaplains perform a range of duties, including official events such as the National Missing Persons Week church service in July and the ACT Traffic Operations charity day at the Kingston Miniature Railway Association. Photos: Brian Hartigan, AFP Photographer.

chaplain! I've just come to see how you're doing," she said.

Chaplains have uninhibited movement around the work place to develop relationships and be a friendly, helpful, and neutral ear, to talk with people about anything.

"I often 'loiter with intent' around the ACT stations," Gayl said. "I'm often greeted with, 'What are you doing here?' — I'm just coming to say hello and 'catch' anyone I can to talk to or have a cuppa with. I love being with people and hearing how they're travelling."

A member does not need to be religious to seek the help of AFP chaplains.

"Chaplains support all AFP members and their families," Gayl said. "A chaplain's role is basically to compassionately walk the journey with people and to assist in whatever way they can," she said.

Chaplains see many people one-on-one and hold all conversations in complete

confidence — chaplains are not required to report if a member has visited them or keep any kind of notes or files on that person.

"Sometimes people have a pressing problem or dilemma in their lives and they need someone to talk to," Gayl said. "It's a safe place to let off steam — a 'safety valve'. Most people have their own solutions to their problems but it's helpful to have someone listen to you and help you work that out".

Chaplains can accompany a member as a support person at Professional Standards interviews or in any situation.

Training

Chaplains assist in training by presenting on AFP learning and development programs, sharing in police activities, and attending critical incidents and emergencies, fatal accidents, and mass casualties to offer support. Recently, the ACT Policing Traffic Operations Social Club hosted a family day for families associated with

the Centre for Road Trauma Support at the Kingston Miniature Railway Association. "It was great fun, especially as I had the opportunity to drive one of the steam trains," she said.

As well as assisting with others' training, chaplains also participate in training of their own.

On 24 and 25 July this year, Roger O'Donnell and Gayl Mills attended the NSW Police Chaplaincy Sydney Metropolitan Regions Annual Training Seminar at the Sydney Police Centre in Surry Hills.

Gayl said the experience provided an opportunity to see how other organisations work 'from the inside'. "Commissioner Moroney attended to give an address and awards to chaplains for service, and we also heard other interesting presentations on such things as the APEC summit to be held in Sydney next year and 'A day in the life of an area commander'," she said.

More information about the AFP chaplains can be found on the AFPHub. Click on General services, then on Chaplain Services. They are available 24 hours a day, every week.