

**Rebuilding Communities after Natural Disasters:
Lessons from Community Sector Responses to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires
CSSV AGM: Thursday 24 March**

BACKGROUND

I would like to talk to you about some of the strategies used by Victorian Catholic social welfare agencies in the diocese of Melbourne, Sandhurst and Gippsland in implementing community recovery programs after the 2009 Victorian bushfires. I hope that the findings will be useful to other communities and agencies that are also confronting the aftermath of a natural disaster. I also hope that it may assist Catholic agencies and parishes in their preparation for possible further natural disasters.

In 2009 Centacare Gippsland, Centacare Sandhurst and Centacare Melbourne received funding from the Archbishop's Bushfire Appeal to provide services to communities affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires. The Catholic Community Bushfire Response was funded for three years, but the aim was that when it ended there would be sustainable programs in place.

Centacare Melbourne's bushfire response team are operating in the areas to the north of Melbourne which were affected by the Kilmore East and Murrindindi fires on 'Black Saturday', 7 February. These were the fires that had received the most media attention and which were responsible for 159 of the 173 deaths.

Centacare Gippsland response team operate primarily in the area of the Churchill and Delburn fires; the Delburn fire occurred on 28-30 January.

Centacare Sandhurst response team operate in the area of the Bendigo and Redesdale fires. The Bendigo fire occurred in Long Gully, a suburb very close to the centre of Bendigo. Redesdale is a mostly rural area about 50 km from Bendigo.

In both Gippsland and Bendigo, there is a feeling that their experiences have not been given due attention and that their losses have not been fully acknowledged.

In August 2009 the Australian Catholic University's Quality of Life and Social Justice Research Centre, as asked by CSSV, Centacare Gippsland, Centacare Melbourne and Centacare Sandhurst to begin a three-year longitudinal study of the Bushfire Response. Our role was to document and analyse both the effectiveness of the strategies used to respond to the bushfire crisis and to record the gaps in those strategies. We were also asked to develop principles and guidelines that can be used in future crises. We are now 18 months into the study.

PHASES IN THE RECOVERY PERIOD

We identified five periods or 'phases' within the recovery period I will talk about the role of Catholic agencies in each of these stages before going into greater detail about some of the issues raised.

Catholic Response to the phases

Phase One

Phase one comprised the first two weeks following the fires and was characterised by rapidity and versatility, albeit with some disorganisation. Welfare agencies and government reacted with commendable speed and with a willingness to work cooperatively.

St Vincent de Paul had volunteers working through their conferences and centres providing food or food vouchers, clothing, furniture as well as fulfilling many other roles. We found that St Vincent de Paul was very active immediately after the bushfires with 80 conferences assisting more than 5,000 people.

There were also people from Catholic orders who were able to become actively involved quite quickly.

Catholic schools opened up their doors and were quickly able to assist. In one area local schools also provided administrative support for workers, thus freeing up other volunteers for the other work they needed to do.

A bushfire chaplain mentioned the important role that Catholic schools and parishes played:

... the local Catholic school could do a lot, they knew everyone's phone number for example, the principal rang every family in his school and ascertained what happened to them, where are they and listed it all, much more quickly because he knew the people.

Local parishes also played an important role both in supplying volunteers and supporting parish members and the wider community, but due to the location of most of the affected areas no other Catholic agencies were physically located in the affected towns.

Phase Two

Phase two, beginning two weeks after the fires, saw both order and disorder. People have consistently spoken about the days and weeks immediately after the bushfires when they perceived some agencies like the Red Cross as being well-organised, even rehearsed in the role they would play. Most agencies were not prepared for the scale of the disaster..

The Department of Human Services set up a number of Community Service Hubs where bushfire survivors could access a range of services provided by government and community service agencies. It also established a case management service for survivors. These created some order but they had problems of recruiting and training case managers.

On the other hand, the level of public goodwill and the desire to help paradoxically promoted disorder, with challenges related to the organisation and control of volunteers and the distribution of donated goods.

In other situations existing organisations extended their roles and added new ones. Centacare Gippsland was able to employ a grief counsellor at the six-weeks mark with unsolicited Commonwealth funds. In Melbourne and Sandhurst some existing staff were re-assigned to work for a while in bushfire relief work.

Churches already had strong links into the community including visiting and welfare programs, so they extended and adapted them.

The third phase

The third phase, at approximately three months, was marked by the withdrawal of people and organisations that were involved in the immediate post-bushfire period. The withdrawal of the army from Kinglake, one of the most devastated towns in the area north of Melbourne, was remarked on as particularly significant, and was largely seen as not well planned, with an inadequate handover and gaps left in still required skills.

Timing was important. The Centacares entered the field some months after the fires and were concerned with long term recovery programs; consequently there was time for investigation of needs. This was particularly significant for Centacare Melbourne, who commissioned a coordinator to conduct a needs analysis. Those first three months were used to establish relationships with communities, agencies and services. In due course the coordinator was appointed to coordinate the entire set of programs.

The fourth phase

The fourth phase began at about six months. It was in this period that new staff were employed by the Centacares, specifically to work for the Catholic Bushfire Recovery program. I will talk to you more about this period in a few minutes.

The fifth phase

The fifth phase began as the anniversary of the bushfires was marked with memorial services and gatherings. Some of our interviewees have remarked that during this phase there was some expectation that bushfire survivors would have recovered, or be returning to their old life. This is not necessarily the case. Physical, emotional and psychological rebuilding can all be much more long term. The Centacares are still working in the regions and

will continue until at least the end of three years. Many other services have been withdrawn.

THE ROLE OF THE CENTACARES

I am now going to talk about the role that the three Centacares and other members of the Catholic community played at phase three and beyond.

Establishing themselves

The Centacares applied to the Archbishop's Charitable Fund Bushfire Appeal but the funding from was not tied to a specific program or group, such as youth or families. The Centacares were therefore able to make their own decisions, based on their own local knowledge and prior research, on where the money would best be spent.

Unlike Sandhurst and Gippsland, Centacare Melbourne was entering geographical areas where it did not have any physical locations. However, all three Centacares were to some extent new entrants in working in a disaster situation so they needed to work out how they would deliver their services.

Gippsland and Sandhurst staff had some existing links with local government and other agencies in the region, and recognised the need to encourage and develop these relationships. These relationships were important given that local government in Victoria has a statutory responsibility to prepare and maintain a municipal emergency management plan.

In contrast Melbourne staff needed to establish themselves with local government and other agencies. There was some duplication of services even prior to Centacare lifting its presence. This meant that they had to find a place for themselves and overcome some baggage:

I found that being a Catholic organisation carries baggage and that there's a lot of dispelling of myths that needs to happen and you can only do that through personal relationships and connections so I spent a lot of time doing that I worked a lot, or

tried to maintain a connection with the parish priest to see what was going on there and how we could be in partnership or working together. (Centacare)

It was difficult for Centacare Melbourne to make the links with local government, partly because they did not have a presence in the region prior to the fires and also because local governments in these areas were barely coping with the disaster. As one local government employee said:

I admit I didn't have a good understanding of Centacare... We've certainly had a strong connection to the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul.

In each of the diocese interviewees reported a lack of coordination between agencies (both between religious based and non-religious based agencies) and between agencies and government. This resulted in a duplication of services which were offered with the best intentions but without coordinating with each other.

The Centacare staff and managers in each region were aware that they needed to work out quickly what other organisations were doing, with whom they should make contact to get up to speed, and what gaps they could fill. This was not always an easy task, as a Bendigo worker noted:

You can't just come into a situation with other organisations and a community and go we're here to help, what do you want us to do, because the community and those organisations are already under stress and a bit fragile in that regard. So having built the relationships in the good times actually helps you deliver in the bad times.

The Centacares also needed to establish links with the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, which was created after the bushfires by the state government to coordinate recovery and re-building, and with state government departments, in particular the Department of Human Services.

Centacare staff made contact with case managers and established processes whereby referrals could be made for those survivors who needed on-going counselling or other

support. St Vincent de Paul staff also formed relationships with case managers so that they were able to provide material aid to survivors when required.

There were already other agencies working with the bushfire affected areas providing a variety of services and the Centacares also needed to make contact with them. They did this for a number of reasons. One was that they did not want to duplicate services. They also wanted to work with other agencies in a cooperative and collegial way, partly to allay any fears that they were in competition for funding or clients but also because it was their professional and ethical view that this was the right way to proceed. One advantage of such cooperation for the agencies was that the workers could provide each other with emotional and practical support.

A very important element of the Centacare response was the development of networks within the communities. Relationships already existed with some other organisations, particularly within the Catholic sector. The Centacares had the advantage of existing links with Catholic parishes, schools and other Catholic agencies.

When I first started I used to go out to the Traralgon South Hub and have a table out there and when people came in I'd introduce myself and see if they needed assistance and arrange to go and see them in their home. After about three or four weeks out there, people got to know I was in the area and what I was doing and I was getting a lot of phone calls at home or referrals from other people so the time it took sitting out at the relief centre, I could be out doing a home visit so .. I went to both the council and the Commonwealth case workers fortnightly meetings and explained to them what I was all about, what I was doing, gave them some vouchers to hand out and my card and then it just kept rolling in from there, the referrals....

Adaptability and Flexibility

Being adaptable and flexible was necessary for all aspect of the work being done in the bush fire recovery process. I will talk about three aspects of adaptability namely services, methods, and staff.

Adaptable and flexible services.

The Centacares realised at an early stage that they had to be adaptable and flexible in the way they delivered their programs. They recognised the needs to target the response the needs of the people in each region, both geographically and demographically. For example, Long Gully, the suburb of Bendigo affected by the fires, was generally recognised as an urban community of predominantly low socio-economic status with a high unemployment rate and many social problems. Redesdale, the other area where Centacare Bendigo concentrated its recovery programs, was a rural and predominantly farming area.

Centacare workers approached each of these communities by asking what they could do and how they could fit in. Rather than offering a service immediately, they could take time to find out what was wanted and needed. This was an important quality in areas where people had sometimes been almost over-served, due to the large number of agencies and individuals offering help immediately after the fires.

Adaptable and flexible 'counselling'.

Formal counselling was often not the most appropriate and effective approach in the immediate aftermath. Often people just needed someone to listen to their story and to provide practical advice or assistance. As a result the Centacares developed an approach of combining counselling with community development; this approach is still continuing.

Staff needed to be able to be adaptable and flexible in the way they approach their jobs, especially in relation to counselling and community development but also in access to and delivery of other services, including practical assistance. Counsellors needed a different set of skills apart from those they used in their usual counselling settings.

Adaptable and flexible staff.

Centacare workers needed to be flexible and adaptable, as they were almost invariably working in new and testing environments. Adaptability and flexibility sometimes bring their own tensions and challenges, for individuals and for organisations. For others it provides an opportunity for personal and professional growth and development. The ability to live with a lack of structure and process is clearly very important in the early phases, but there is

some evidence that, as time passes, agencies move towards requiring more structure. This may bring its own problems for both the agencies and for workers who have learned to live with and like both the freedom and the responsibilities inherent in a loose and flexible structure.

The Centacares were conscious of the needs of the welfare of their own staff, who could potentially suffer emotional and psychological damage from their work with the bushfire survivors, and provided supervision and counselling for them. The emotional effects of working with bushfire survivors could also be considerable, despite the Centacare supervision model. After 18 months there has been quite a turnover of staff.

Costs associated with being adaptable and flexible

There were both institutional and personal costs attached to the Centacare approach. The other side of flexibility and adaptability was that roles kept changing.

Some staff were uncomfortable with an unstructured and fluid environment, where community development and counselling sometimes seemed to run into each other, and professional standards seemed compromised when counselling sessions could take place in clients' kitchens. Other staff revelled in the lack of structure, and regretted the gradual reversion to a more standard model.

VOLUNTEERS

The role of volunteers in the early period was crucial in many respects; however, it also seems that more people wanted to volunteer than could be used.

There are also concerns about volunteers burn out and neglecting their own needs for those of the community:

They want to contribute, want to help, got things they can give but then they go into this adrenalin driven position where everyone around them is concerned that they are working so hard and about to fall over...

Informal volunteering

Immediately after the fires, many people from the local community were involved in the recovery process. Often the help provided was informal and with little or no formal organisation overseeing these activities. In different communities locals gathered together for support and provided such things as food, drinking water, animal feed, emotional support as well as talking together about their experience. They were also involved in tasks such as shooting injured stock, clearing fallen trees, connecting generators and building fences.

Some activities which had been somewhat ad hoc in the early days after the fires were formalised over time. An example of how a volunteering exercise could move from the informal to the formal among residents is 'Blaze Aid', an initiative to build fences for farmers who had lost them (Wilson 2009).

Negative consequences

While the positive outcomes of volunteering were extensive there were also some negative consequences of local people becoming involved in volunteering. Some formal volunteer experiences resulted in heightened conflict and tension between those involved. This seemed to occur more frequently in recovery committees and in local recreational and community organisations rather than welfare agencies.

Over commitment impacted on the volunteers' health and put strain on the family. Many volunteers put large amounts of physical and emotional energy into these volunteer activities at a time when there were numerous other demands on their physical and emotional resources. This resulted in them being worn out and in some cases doubly traumatised as they listened to others' stories of loss and grief. This was variously described by the workers as 'burnout', 'vicarious trauma' and 'exhaustion'.

I think the volunteers that were doing it day in and day out, definitely in my viewpoint have got vicarious trauma so you have to think about that as well. (#8)

The ones who have given a lot to recovery are exhausted and the ones who have given a lot to the community and they are needing now to give it to themselves (#2)

Another negative outcome of volunteers working long hours in their community was that the time they spend on these activities took them from their own farms, properties, jobs, businesses and families, all of which had also been affected by the fires.

“I’ve given my heart and soul to this recovery process for 14 to 15 months now, yet I come back to my block and look out the back and my property is a mess” and “my relationships are a mess” so I think in terms of resilience it depends on who you talk to.

Some volunteers recognised the personal cost it was having on their families and reduced the time they were putting into these activities, others found it harder to withdraw or to pull back.

Since then I think a lot of people, in terms of the people involved in the community recovery committees or relief centres or things like that, you can sense a lot of burn out and a lot of people are starting to shift away from spending so much time in the groups. (#2)

Handing over - withdrawing

There did not seem to be any easy way for people who had been spending large amounts of time and effort on volunteering to ease back or to hand over to new comers. Further, it was claimed by several participants that people’s health or wellbeing was being affected by the demands upon them. Often volunteers did not recognise the toll it was taking on their own well-being, and one worker claimed that they did not take kindly to suggestions that they should pull back on their volunteer efforts. One manager noted that the only solution was to wait until they came to their own realisation and then help them to find ways to withdraw that maintain the service but do not detract from their achievement.

They want to contribute, want to help, got things they can give but then they go into this adrenalin driven position where everyone around them is concerned that they

are working so hard and about to fall over and the reality is that you can't stop someone in their tracks and take away the power you've given them, no one is going to give it up until they fall over

PLANNING FOR FUTURE DISASTERS: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

I would now like to run our attention to what we have learned from the study that might be useful for planning for future disasters.

Workers skills and needs

There is a need to provide better training for workers who may be called on in the future on how to respond, and how to work in an unstructured, and sometimes chaotic environment. The kind of skill set needed in the aftermath of a disaster ought to be considered and planned for this eventuality put in place.

It would be helpful in the planning process to look at the kinds of supports that workers might need, e.g. administrative, and work out how staff can be immediately be transferred from existing roles to assist in an emergency and how they can be back filled.

Local knowledge:

There is a need to harness local knowledge and develop relationships with local organisations, to build on what is already there rather than start new organisations. To do this, church-based agencies (including schools and parishes) need assistance in identifying what their role can be and what assets they can use. For example schools can play a crucial role. They have buildings that can be opened up to residents and administrative staff who can assist in contacting pupils and their families. They can also be reception centres for goods that have been collected for distribution.

It would be helpful if there could be a way of helping parishes work out what they can provide and to put systems in place in case of another emergency:

- Parish workers need support so that they do not become stressed by the work.
- It would help issues of duplication if dialogue between the other churches and welfare organisation were fostered in order to develop a joint plan and to share information.
- It might be worth thinking about a network of parishes, each with its own resources in the form of people and buildings, as building blocks for recovery.

Catholic agencies and organisations: It is important to work out what Catholic agencies and organisations can do in respect to their areas of expertise, and the range / geographical area to which they could reasonably respond.

One Catholic priest said:

I would think the parishes should just open their halls and put up trestles and tables and get the urns organised and get the women's auxiliary there because people will turn up eventually because what we saw was that the centres were overwhelmed and the locals want to go somewhere local because pretty quickly they get rattled that there's all these strangers and people telling so many different things. They really want to go to someone they know who knows something.

Relationships with government:

Forming relationship with three tiers of government is a key factor in what any organisation can do in the recovery.

The Victorian state emergency management plan nominates some agencies, both government and non-government, as having responsibility for specific elements in emergency response and recovery.

Connecting with and making a relationship with local government and its disaster management plan is essential to the process.

Communication:

There needs to be good communication systems and information systems within and between church based agencies and other agencies. In particular the agencies should establish the areas of expertise of the Catholic and other agencies, the geographical areas in which they can work and how staff can immediately be transferred from existing roles to help in an emergency. This should include assessment of how roles can be backfilled and what other support (eg administrative) workers need.

This might require a central coordinating body. It should be remembered in this context that the state emergency management plan nominates some agencies, both government and non-government, as having specific responsibilities in emergency response and recovery.

Volunteering: Things to think about

There needs to be consideration of how volunteer coordination could be more effectively handled in future crises. Having processes for handing over or taking turns in leadership roles seemed to be a critical factor in minimizing conflict and avoiding burnout. We asked some participants if they saw a solution to the problem of burnout and over-commitment. One participant suggested that in future natural disasters, those involved in setting recovery and community committees might have in their guidelines a rotating membership and responsibilities and avoid having the same people on several committees. However, it was noted that getting people to recognise their own limitations would not be easy.

Exit plan

There needs to be a well thought out exit plan.

...having the concept of an exit strategy as part of the provision of the service should be part of the contract from the beginning.

The very fact that some services will exit needs to be managed. It is important to have planned for withdrawing at the end of the allocated time frame so people are not stranded and left with no services.

One interviewee pointed out that the increased level of services can result in raised expectations, and that these expectations may not be fulfilled:

I think in these areas they're getting a huge influx of services they've never seen before, they wouldn't have had one or two of these services, now they have access to maybe 20 different agencies if they look for it and within a period of time, that 20 will incrementally be removed back down to very few.

This issue is part of a larger concern about what is the right time to enter and leave after a natural disaster.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

There is a need for church-based agencies to be more pro-active rather than reactive – to prepare for future events. A number of questions arose in relation to the Centacare role after the bushfires.

- **What might a diocesan/parish/agency plan for the future look like in terms of preparing for future possible disasters, i.e. fire, flood, major industrial accidents, explosions etc?**
- **How can Catholic agencies including parishes and schools link with the State emergency management plan apart from through the Victorian Council of Churches?**
- **How can (Catholic) agencies or organisations have a more coordinated approach?**
- **Should there be a register of all parishes with details of the local government area within which they sit?**
- **How can volunteers be coordinated? What strategies can be put in place to prevent or minimise burn-out.**

One possibility is that in order to prepare for a future disaster, working groups could be formed in which there are people (from a range of organisations) responsible for different sections of the response

Professor Ruth Webber