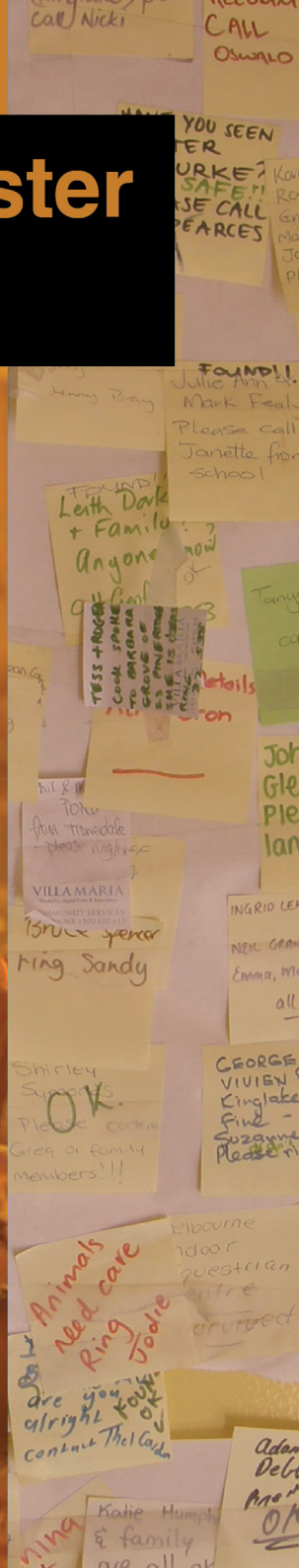


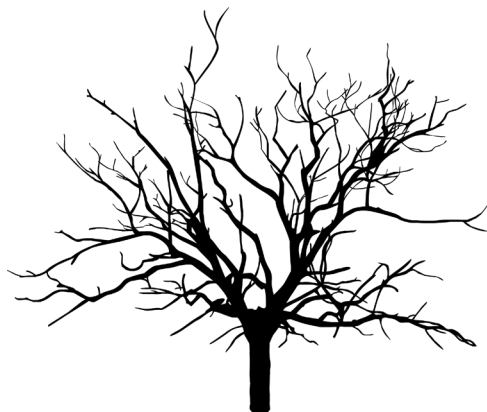
Working with Disaster Clergy & Bushfires



Dr Lisa Jacobson

Working with Disaster

Clergy & Bushfires



Dr Lisa Jacobson

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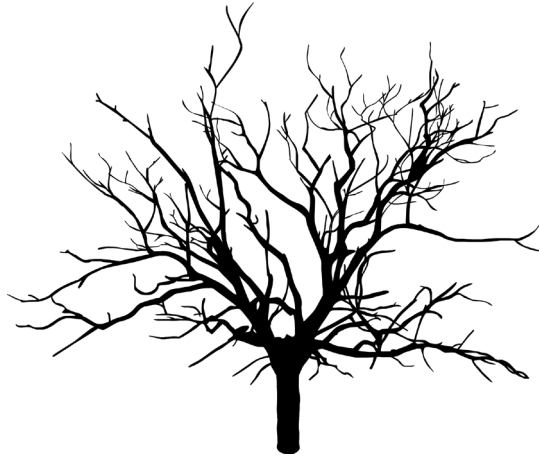
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www.colliercharitable.org





**This report is dedicated to the people impacted
by the Victorian Bushfires of February 7, 2009:
to the 173 people who suffered traumatic deaths,
the survivors who experienced trauma and loss,
and those who reached out
in compassion to help them.**



Recover. Verb. From the Latin: *recuperare* “get again”

1. Return to a normal state of health, mind, or strength
- 2 Find or regain possession of (something stolen or lost)
- 3 Regain control of oneself (or a physical or mental state)



*To recover after trauma is not to be cured but to heal;
to re-cover the interior self, as we would cover
the outer self with blankets after shock.*

*It is a way of re-mem-bering,
of putting back together what has been torn apart,
re-covering the skeletons of lives with new skin,
and rewriting the old story that no longer fits
with a new story that does.*

Lisa Jacobson (concept provided by Rob Gordon)

About The Yarra Institute

The Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy (YIRSP) explores contemporary social issues from an ethical point of view, while drawing on the deep scholarly resources in church and community groups more broadly.

YIRSP brings a new research capability about the role of faith and religion in shaping social policy in Australia. Members of various church groups, particularly from the Salvation Army and the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Churches, are involved in its direction.

Institute Board members are well known scholars and include Rev Dr Stephen Ames (chair), Dr Anne Elvey, Dr John Bottomley, Drs Therese and Jim D’Orsa, Major Brad Halse (Salvation Army), Dr Rowan Ireland, Dr John D’Arcy May, and Dr Paul Rule. Dr Bruce Duncan CSSR has been appointed Director and Dr John D’Arcy May Associate Director.

The Institute shares responsibility for promoting social justice units within the University of Divinity. Though it springs from a Christian milieu, it also seeks to explore and promote relationships with other religious and philosophical traditions, including the great non-Christian religions, especially from the aspect of social ethics and human wellbeing. www.yarrainstitute.org.au

About Creative Ministries Network

Creative Ministries Network (CMN) is a charitable UnitingCare agency, inspired to embody the gifts of reconciliation, justice and healing, through serving people, families and communities suffering work-related harm, and by supporting and developing creativity at work for the common good. For thirty years it has also conducted a viable Workplace Relations Consultancy and Research service; and, over half that time, it has also conducted a viable fee-for-service program of pastoral/professional supervision for clergy and church workers. www.cmn.unitingcare.org.au

About the Author

Lisa Jacobson is a community consultant and award-winning author who has worked extensively in bushfire recovery. Lisa facilitated the Whittlesea Bushfire Permanent Memorials, leads writing workshops with fire-affected communities, and continues to consult with bushfire survivors and workers to honour their stories and document their experiences of the Black Saturday bushfires that occurred in Victoria on 7 February, 2009. www.lisajacobson.org



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Background

The Black Saturday Bushfires, also known as the Victorian Bushfires, were a series of fires ignited or burning across Victoria on Saturday 7 February, 2009. The fires occurred during extreme bushfire-weather conditions and resulted in Australia's highest ever loss of life from a natural disaster. Fire storms claimed 173 human lives, injured 5000 people, destroyed 2029 homes, killed countless pets, livestock, and native animals, and burnt through over 4,500 square kilometres of land.

A disaster like this takes its toll. There were the immediate deaths from fire, smoke inhalation and radiant heat as well as the deaths which followed as a result of severe injuries and burns. In the wake of the fire, suicides, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness and domestic violence all peaked and continued to peak for months and years afterwards.¹ The fires rolled everything else into them; what came before and after.

Who is to say why some people were able to regenerate like the charcoal trees that sprouted tiny green leaves, while others could not? Sometimes the God-shaped hole is so big, it seems not even God can fill it. If the tragedy is that not everyone who survived has recovered, the wonder is that so many have.

Churches and clergy played a significant role in the recovery and rebuilding process which began immediately after the fires and, six years on, is still in process. They were part of the massive bushfire recovery effort that saw many government and non-government organisations, including local and state councils, emergency services, health and welfare groups and building authorities, all come to the aid of communities besieged by bushfire trauma.

This report is informed by a Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy research project that set out to research and better understand the experiences of clergy who worked with bushfire survivors during this time.

It will be distributed to the University of Divinity in Melbourne and the Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry (VCC EM), which is the coordinating body for churches in the State Emergency and Disaster Response Plan. www.vccem.org.au

It aims to better equip theological training colleges and contribute to the development of ecumenical social policy for responses from the church to future natural disasters.

¹ This information is readily available for those who want to pursue it further. See, for instance, <http://www.theage.com.au/documents/publications/whp-TheWayHeTellsIt.pdf> and <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/ashes-to-ashes-forgotten-fire-town-mourns-again-20120518-1ywba.html>



Origins of the Project

The Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy was aware through its ecumenical networks of the lack of grief support services for rural and regional Victorians, especially in responding to traumatic events such as natural disasters. The Institute was concerned about the stresses this situation caused for health and welfare professionals in these areas, including clergy. Observed stress effects on clergy have included adverse health outcomes, turnover of staff, “burnout” and depression.

YIRSP, in partnership with Creative Ministries Network (CMN), was uniquely placed to address the interlocking personal, organisational (that is, the church as organisation) and social needs through an integrated theological, spiritual and psychological approach. This partnership was also strategically placed to ensure the project results were translated into a report such as this one, which can inform social policy at an ecumenical statewide level, as well as inform grief support training in both theological and secular agencies.

It arose out of a desire to understand better the experiences of clergy who work at the frontline of disasters such as the recent bushfires in Victoria;

- a recognition that those who work for the church require spiritual and practical supports specific to their vocation that psychosocial agencies in the wider community are not always able to deliver;
- concerns about how clergy can best be supported by church, government and community infrastructures during natural disasters;
- a need to ensure ongoing, *long-term* support of clergy and others who support impacted communities in the aftermath of disasters.

A disaster such as Black Saturday is, by definition, unexpected, chaotic, terrifying and traumatic. Survivors require immediate attention according to a hierarchy of basic needs. Time is consumed with rebuilding the exterior shells of lives torn apart by the fires. This rebuilding can take years, and there is little time for interior healing. It is a period of great shock, fear and disorientation that grows in complexity as grief, loss, post-traumatic stress and burnout set in, which can continue for years.

It is timely that, six years on, YIRSP supports research into the experiences of clergy who worked with community impacted by bushfire trauma, how they dealt with this work at the time of the disaster and, long-term, how they are dealing with it now.



The aims of this project were threefold:

1) To research the support needs of clergy and lay pastoral workers in communities traumatised and disrupted by the Victorian Bushfires. This research was to take place through a series of interviews (or conversations) with clergy from a range of denominations including Anglican, Catholic, Uniting Church, Salvation Army, Baptist, Church of Christ, and Assembly of God. The geographical focus of the project would encompass five areas in the Murrindindi Shire affected by the fires: Kinglake, Yarra Glen, Whittlesea, Marysville, and Healesville.

2) To design a series of holistic, integrative support workshops, informed by the research, to meet the needs of clergy, lay pastors and lay pastoral teams working with trauma in disaster events, with an emphasis on bushfires. The workshops would draw on training resources from Creative Ministries Network and the Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry and include:

- education on working with trauma in disaster events;
- strategies for pastoral support within church and community ritual leadership;
- an invitation for clergy to renew their prayer life;
- opportunities for clergy to integrate theological, spiritual and psychological insights from earlier workshops into personal and professional practices.

3) To document and evaluate the project, including its consultation phase and workshops, as a Draft Report (to be distributed to the University of Divinity and the Victorian Council of Churches), which:

- describes the project and its findings;
- outlines its social policy implications for future clergy in-service training and the development of theological/pastoral education in Victoria;
- identifies any gaps in this training and education to which the report may contribute, as a component of an integrated ecumenical response at state and parish levels for emergency responses to natural disasters;
- strengthens practical, psychosocial and spiritual supports for clergy and lay pastoral workers when responding to trauma and natural disasters;
- evaluates the applicability of the report's findings and proposals for fire-affected regions to those afflicted by other types of disasters, such as floods.



Methodology

The project was not intended to be exhaustive but, rather, an explorative investigation into the experiences of clergy during recent bushfires, with the intention of strengthening supports and further understanding in this area.

There were limits: a budget of \$13,000 and a short time frame (6-10 months). However, the project's limits were also its strengths. Research was necessarily qualitative and, in the spirit of YIRSP and CMN, more interested in intimate moments of story than quantitative data. Data collection is, of course, an entirely useful approach, but it was not the purpose of this project.

As a consultant, I was supported by a Reference Group with representatives from YIRSP (Bruce Duncan), CMN (John Bottomley), VCC EM (Stuart Stuart) and the Combined Christian Churches of Whittlesea (Ivan Peterson).

Eleven clergy were interviewed for a minimum of one hour each, with follow up phone calls. Numbers of clergy from various denominations were: Anglican (3), Catholic (2), Uniting Church (2), Baptist (1), Church of Christ (1), Assembly of God (1) and Presbyterian (1).

Nobody knows how many ministers were on the ground during the Victorian Bushfires. Although we cannot claim the eleven ministers interviewed as representative of *all* who were there, what we can say is that they were representative of those whom the denominational bodies identified. Five additional ministers were contacted but did not respond. Two of these, I was advised, were still very wounded, emotionally or physically, and not in a position to give accounts of their experiences.

There were some further barriers to finding suitable clergy for interviews. For instance, representative Salvation Army officers were sought but not found – the church's administrative centre informed the author that these had been brought into fire areas from outside but had long since withdrawn. A further complication was that clergy assumed several different kinds of roles in the fires, and these were spread across a range of denominations in the five geographical areas and surrounds. These were:

- local clergy whose parishes survived, and who were still there;
- local clergy whose parishes survived, but who had relocated or retired;
- clergy not local to the area, who became involved after the fires but had since withdrawn;
- clergy new to the area who had not experienced the fires at all.

This resulted in quite a few road blocks and dead ends. Denominational bodies often lacked a “hub” or core person to provide a list of ministers who worked in fire areas, past and present. If my aim was to carry out a rigorous selection procedure, the reality was that my best guide was God, the trust that He would lead me to the right people, and a priority that clergy selected had worked at the frontline of the fires. Of the eleven clergy interviewed:

- 8 were working in local churches in the fire area and surrounds at the time of the fires;
- 2 were locum brought in from outside the fire areas for outreach and tended to travel “solo” (i.e. not directly linked in with local churches);
- 1 was a locum brought in from outside the fire area for outreach and directly linked in with a local church.

At the beginning of each interview, ministers were informed that their stories would be anonymous and that material would not be publicly circulated without their consent. They would also be sent a copy of the Draft Report prior to its release so they would have the opportunity to respond. Finally, if at any stage they preferred information to be withdrawn, they were invited to contact me. All clergy interviewed indicated they were in agreement with this process.

It is the nature of trauma, for survivors and disaster workers, that some things are unspeakable. The clergy interviewed in this project are people who have seen things no one should ever see: people burnt alive in cars, dead children, hideously injured pets and wildlife. I did not always receive the whole story from those I interviewed, nor was it my prerogative to ask for it. Subjects were asked to talk about their experiences, prompted by a series of questions, but the direction of the conversation had its own flow, and meandered where it would. My brief, initially, was to *listen*. In doing so, I listened not only to what was being said, but also what wasn't.

This is a report in which the questions raised are as important as any answers. It is possible that the best answers might come later when others have read it.

If any particular question drives this project above others, it is one posed by the Reverend John Bottomley, founder of CMN, who said early on:

“*The ground we stand on is that mystery we call God. How does the mystery of love we call God heal the body and the spirit? This is the tradition working at its best.*”

It is our hope that the experiences of these clergy, who have entrusted us with their stories, will encourage church organisations and theological institutions to provide clergy with the best supports possible so they might enter and exit disaster zones spiritually, emotionally, and physically intact. If this can be achieved, the relationship between the church and survivors becomes something else altogether: a conduit through which the spirit can flow. Such work leaves the imprint of Christ: compassionate, God-given and long-lasting.



Format

The main body of this report is divided into two parts:

1) Conversations with Clergy

Working with trauma in fire-affected communities

Support from the church in the event of disaster

Support from government & non-government agencies

2) Workshops for Clergy, Lay Pastoral Workers & Laity

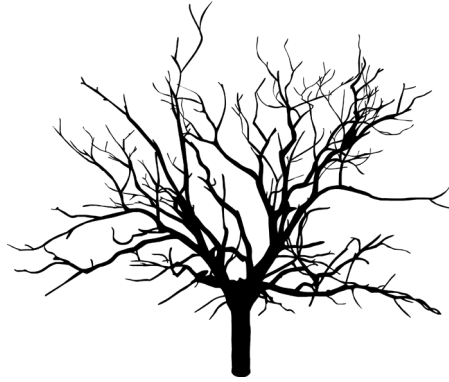
Working with Trauma

Clergy Focus Group

Creativity and Prayer

Each section describes the project phase and its findings, followed by the social policy implications these findings raise for the church's response to disaster at state and parish levels.

Final Thoughts and Recommendations adopted by the YIRSP Board comprise sections 3 and 4.



Part One
Conversations with Clergy

*“ You don't have
to declare yourself.
It's not about you
but them.*

*You just have to be
there and listen,
and break bread. ”*



(i) Experiences of clergy working with trauma in fire-affected communities

What we heard

All eleven clergy interviewed vividly recall the extremity of chaos, terror and trauma that impacted Black Saturday survivors. Their recollections have a generic similarity, especially when describing people directly after the disaster:

“ *The scale and ferocity of the fires: we were dealing with people who had experienced things they should never ever have had to. They were shell-shocked, on such a large scale: a whole community in shock and nearly everyone in church as well.*

The people I met that very first night. Their faces still haunt me; burnt, covered in ash. A local family. Going up the mountain the next week. Seeing the devastation, the blue and white police tape, the melted bitumen and cars, and knowing people died in those cars haunts me.”

Several clergy I interviewed had received little or no trauma training before the fires, despite working in a fire-prone area. Thus, they worked intuitively, using what knowledge they had from everyday clerical experiences in grief and loss, and adapting them to the disaster event.

Others had previously worked with tertiary trauma.² They had held the hands of people trapped in car accidents, sat with men dying of AIDS, buried children, and comforted the families who grieved for them. Even so, several acknowledged that the trauma they witnessed after Black Saturday, seeing “the haunted look in survivors’ eyes, and the shock”, was just “too much”.

One described the aftermath of a disaster like this:

“ *It is as if a giant fist has slammed down on a jigsaw puzzle, into the place where people once were. And some of the pieces are broken but the picture can still be seen. And some of the pieces need healing. And some of the pieces have been scattered on the ground and need to be picked up. And some of the pieces have been lost and will never be regained.”*

² The term “tertiary” in this context may be understood as “that which requires an advanced level of medical care, usually provided by subspecialists after the delivery of primary medical care.”

When asked in interviews about the degree of stress and burnout ministers felt they had experienced as a result of the fires:

- 5 clergy reported low levels of stress or burnout;
- 4 clergy reported moderate to high levels of stress and burnout;
- 2 clergy reported high levels of mental and/or physical stress and burnout.

Of the five clergy who reported low levels, three were locums not local to the area, and two were ministers with churches outside of those areas directly impacted by the fires.

Of the four who reported moderate to high levels, one minister's church was destroyed by the fires, one had previously lived in the fire zone, one was from a church closely linked with the fire zone, and one was from outside the area.

Of the two who reported high levels, one was a minister whose church and house were both destroyed by fire. The other had felt abandoned and unsupported by his denomination during the disaster.

The reported levels of stress for these clergy appear to be higher the greater their personal exposure to the destructive forces of the fires. Across the board, clergy said more training was needed. They said:

“ One man had just lost his whole family in a car which had exploded on the road in front of him. I mean, how does someone deal with a thing like that? I had to convey the news to that man that his entire family was dead, and I'd never done that before, ever.

I remember a chaplain saying to a man who'd just lost his family, 'It'll be ok.' What an idiot! Obviously it wasn't going to be okay! I'd really like to see chaplains better trained. ”

Local clergy found their existing connections with the community greatly assisted their pastoral work, especially those ministers who were seen not only as clergy but also in other roles around town. It meant they were able to “put a personal face on things that would be otherwise impersonal” for those overwhelmed by the number of services coming in from outside to help.

But clergy who lost churches and homes in the fires and/or were present during the chaos and terror that was Black Saturday suffered significantly: shock, stress, distress, aggravated health conditions and fatigue all affected their capacity to resume clerical duties. Yet resume them they did, running on adrenalin, holding memorial services from the first day afterwards, and many of the funerals.

Clergy brought in to assist from outside the area had the challenge of establishing trust with small town communities that did not know them, but they also found benefits. One said:

“ I’m not conscious of experiencing any depression because of the things I heard, but then I hadn’t been up in these areas before the fires and perhaps that made a difference. I found it very difficult to imagine what those places looked like and had no emotional attachment to them in that I wasn’t there on the day of the fires, or lived there before. ”

Some locums brought in to fire areas were given long-term contracts in outreach by denominations that recognised a need for additional long-term support for local clergy attempting to combine everyday duties with the demands of a traumatised laity and community. Several had to take stress leave or resigned from local parishes. One left the church entirely. A very experienced local minister said:

“ It got to the point where I was in danger of snapping someone’s head off in meetings if they so much as spoke out of turn. You can’t see what’s normal anymore and you can’t turn it around in a week or fortnight. The challenge is how to get back on track. ”

Clergy spoke of working intuitively with the chaos and urgency of bushfire recovery in the immediate aftermath, where the formal processes for acquiring materials (ladders, water, school supplies) collapsed and things were freely given. They spoke of how too much red tape around material and spiritual aid affected their work. One minister found himself caught up in a theological dispute about whether it was proper to pray for the dead at a memorial service. Others felt stretched too thin, torn between church duties and the massive wheel of the recovery phase, which turned day and night and never stopped.

Clergy who worked as outreach locum were most philosophical about the chaos of the disaster and expected less support from church infrastructure. One said, “There wasn’t much backup. But then I wasn’t expecting supports to be there. I tend to go in with low expectations.” These ministers tended to draw on their own church communities outside the fire zone for support.

“ You just have to be continually aware of where God is guiding you and the opportunities that he provides, like the mystery of certain people and materials being available at just the right time. A sense of the system unfolding. ”

One of the most striking gaps in pastoral care was assistance for families with the business of death. As this minister said:

“ One of the things we don’t do very well is the initial morgue and post-mortem visit. There is nothing so bleak as visiting a morgue. It is the one place on earth where it feels like there’s no God. I’m surprised there isn’t a chaplain specifically for this job, though it would be a horrible job, and it would have to be shared around. ”

Because that's how the presence of Christ can best be felt in a place like this. By someone to show warmth and kindness and just provide a comforting presence there. ॐ

Despite the frustrations and magnitude of trauma, all clergy working with Black Saturday survivors spoke of moments of healing and redemption that took place in the midst of this. All were unanimous in their conviction that people of faith had a significant role to play, extending compassion to those for whom every day felt like a nightmare to be relived all over again. These redemptive experiences were not necessarily moments of pure grace but, rather, instances in which the dysfunction the fires brought with them temporarily took a back step, and clergy could feel the presence of God at work amidst the grief and loss.



What they recommended: Policy Implications for clergy working in fire-affected communities

- An imperative for the church to prioritise long-term assistance for people impacted by disaster, and to recognise that this care will be required for many years afterwards. As one minister said, “It’s important that when the rest of the world seems to have moved on, the fire-affected community still sees that support from the church is ongoing.”
- A more flexible, ecumenical approach to pastoral work by clergy and the church. One minister says, “I did memorial services for pets and wildlife. It wasn’t difficult. Just a few candles and a bit of cloth. I did what was required of me by the community to honour their losses.”
- Further provision by the church for practical assistance for survivors so that local clergy are not exhausted and overworked. Such support also serves a deeper purpose: men, for instance, may find it easier to talk while doing practical tasks such as stacking wood or mending fences.
- A deeper understanding about disaster ministry, the bulk of which is done *outside the church*: in the main street, at community dinners, in cafes and shops. *Note that Jesus’ entire ministry was similarly outside the church*; ministers who work in this way are in fact returning to the original model.
- Additional provision for this: extra outreach workers and administrative relief sent in for local ministers who work long hours outside the church during disasters, to lessen the risks of burnout.
- Further trauma training for church leaders and lay pastoral teams. This is specialised work requiring expertise that ministers and chaplains do not necessarily get from their everyday ministries.
- The development of detailed, current, annually reviewed Disaster Plans for clergy and laity in disaster-prone areas. During a bushfire, for instance, clergy are temporarily absorbed into the community and it can be some

time before they are able to resume their regular roles.

- A recognition by the church that *all* clergy working in disaster are vulnerable to secondary trauma³ regardless of their expertise, requiring regular, compassionate supervision and debriefs to monitor wellbeing.
- Awareness that there is a gap in the tertiary end of trauma ministry that needs to be filled; namely, chaplains who can accompany people to morgues when required to identify family and friends who have suffered traumatic deaths in disasters, and provide them with support.

³ “Secondary trauma,” also known as “vicarious trauma” or “compassion fatigue” is emotional stress that can result when a person hears about or witnesses another person’s trauma directly. Symptoms mirror those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and include re-experiencing personal trauma, increased arousal and avoidance of the indirect trauma, altered memory and perceptions, exhaustion, detachment, “not feeling safe”, and a lack of trust and autonomy.

*“ God’s not any
denomination, you
know. God’s still
God.”*



(ii) Support from the church in the event of disaster

What we heard

Six of the eleven clergy felt supported by their denominations and, indeed, overwhelmed by the depth and breadth of this support. Four reported that while they felt some support, there was definitely room for review and improvement. One reported a complete lack of support that led, eventually, to serious mental health issues and a departure from the church entirely.

The six clergy who reported feeling supported said this was because their denominations recognised that those who worked in disaster zones were carrying out specialised trauma work in addition to regular clerical duties that required extra time and energy. As one minister said, “Before you can help anyone else, you have to put on your own oxygen mask.”

They said their denominations acknowledged that clergy and laity were all fire-affected and that the extra, frenetic, chaotic and traumatic work of bushfire recovery complicated and compromised their daily work.

They also said their denominations recognised that disaster ministry was *long-term*. It took years. Sending in contracted outreach workers to assist them was evidence of this. (One church supplied an outreach minister on a three year contract, in addition to a regular pastor, with the option of contract renewal). “People kept asking us, ‘Are you going to be here long-term?’”

Several had the benefit of other churches at local, state, interstate and/or international level spontaneously volunteering their support. Suburban churches were identified as a strong but under-utilised resource. One church administrator said, “The next time a fire happens, suburban churches could really be encouraged to choose an area and a church (not necessarily the same denomination) and ask: ‘Is there anything we can do?’”⁴

The four clergy who felt they had received some support from their church denominations, but that the level of support could certainly be improved, identified several gaps. They said that their denominations needed to offer more training. Several reported having done some

4 A Melbourne church helped a minister re-establish home and church after these were both destroyed in the fires. A small suburban church made casseroles for survivors and delivered them over 12-18 months via a church in the fire area. (“We had to get a bigger fridge to freeze them all, and still have relationships with the people we’d drop off the casseroles to.”) A church in Marysville, USA, initiated a knitting project, for a church in Marysville, Australia. Another sent packages to churches for survivors with items such as shopping bags with personal messages, calendars, colourful wool and big knitting needles. (“These bags were a big hit and the kids loved them!”)

emergency training beforehand, but that it was not enough, or that they didn't remember anything about it, or it felt like they were "just ticking the boxes".

There was also a lack of recognition of the extremes to which disasters threw local churches into chaos, which made it difficult to carry out the pastoral care they did in "normal" circumstances.

They described just how fragmented, reduced, or absent rural church congregations become in the event of bushfire disaster. Some congregations temporarily vanished altogether, impacted by grief, loss and trauma. Small churches in country towns who were "not doing well before the fires were not good at reaching out to people during them ... In Marysville, no one was rushing to church for help. In this sense, they were a total loss."

Church leaders were in shock, disorientated, exhausted, emotional, injured, limited by age or existing health issues exacerbated by the fires, running on adrenalin, homeless, travelling long distances due to relocation,⁵ grieving the dead and missing. One minister reflected, "We just didn't look after ourselves well enough."

Several clergy commented on a distinct discomfort at the influx of chaplains brought in from outside the fire area for memorial services directly after the fires, wearing bright orange vests with the word CHAPLAIN on them. One minister was troubled by the fact that not one of them came up to introduce themselves, even though he was clearly running the service. He said community or church members would not go to these chaplains because "they wanted to talk to their own people." Another said:

“There is a need for the church to see this as a five year project, not a five week one. There was a chaplain every ten yards with a vest on. In the second year this would have been more effective, and the third year. You need to stagger it.”

Others had been frustrated by the Salvation Army, whom they felt "came in and took over without consultation" then "pulled out too early", leaving local churches to fill the gap.

Only one minister reported feeling a complete and utter sense of abandonment by his denomination and, while there was only one, his experience and the psychosocial fallout of this is telling. It represents a worst-case scenario of what happens when appropriate support is not provided. It is what the church most certainly does not want to see happen, and a sobering caution for just how important compassionate and informed support is for clergy wellbeing and duty of care when working with disaster.

For these reasons, his story is included here. This minister reports, "In my own church system there was no support at all [for me]" in the early days after the fires and, despite repeated requests, during the long-term stress leave he took in the months and years to follow:

⁵ One priest who lost everything on Black Saturday and had cancer told me that after the fires he'd had to relocate and was consequently driving 60km to his local parish in the fire zone every day. The driving, he says, "took its toll. But the Bishop had said, 'We need you here,' so what do you do?"

“ I haven't had a single email or phone call since I took leave. I would have liked someone trained in mental health to give me a call once a week, someone to keep an eye on me. There was no one. I received, I think, two phone calls. That's it. I took it to the powers that be, but they said, 'Get over it.' In our church culture, you tough it out. My kids have seen what church can do to people. It was really just my wife and I, just each other. Just very isolated. ”

He also reported a complete lack of supervision, regular or specialist:

“ I did the usual tests and I was off the scale for depression and anxiety. The psych asked, 'How often do you see your supervisor?' And I said, 'What's that? I don't even know what that is.' The psych said, 'I'm not surprised you can't cope.' ”

This minister reiterates a recurring theme in this report, namely the sense of feeling torn between too many roles. He describes wanting to be present for his laity, who didn't always understand why he couldn't be as attentive as he had been prior to the fires. Like many local ministers, he was also on numerous bushfire recovery boards and assisting at an ecumenical drop-in centre where suicide prevention, drug and alcohol counselling and domestic violence were prevalent. “The community didn't want to make formal appointments with counsellors,” he said. “They wanted to drop in and see us.”

We might say, there are many sides to every story. And yet the shape of this story in the context of the fires, its downward spiral in the absence of a support system that works, has an intrinsic logic.

“ What happened to me didn't need to happen. If someone had come to me and had a chat, they'd have picked up the signs and I'd still be working, and I'd be in there without hesitation if the fires came again ... I just expected it [the church] to be much more caring. ”



What they recommended: Policy implications for support from the church in the event of disaster

The following recommendations were made by clergy as a result of the experience of working with disaster:

- A recognition by denominations that clergy working with trauma require expert *long-term* practical and spiritual support for years, not months;
- An awareness that clergy may be too caught up in the disaster to ask for what they need; also that clergy may be affected by secondary trauma that impacts on work and family life;
- Provision of holidays for clergy and their families as early as eight weeks after the disaster to prevent burnout;
- Denominational contributions of large-scale financial support;
- Regular, empathic and suitable supervision for clergy by supervisors who, above all, “understand the human heart”;
- Local, ecumenical prayer groups providing spiritual “anchors” for clergy;
- Regular long-term counselling services, mental health checks and debriefing by “someone who could just listen” at no cost to clergy working in disaster zones or who are on stress leave as a result of this;⁶
- Extra assistance with clerical administration and sermons, especially for ministers carrying out multiple roles, in a way that encourages them and imparts the sense they are valued and supported;
- Proactive liaising with clergy in the fire zone and churches outside of it so that suitable volunteers can be sent in;⁷
- Trauma training and course refreshers for clergy before and in between bushfires. *Mandatory* trauma training for clergy in fire-prone areas.⁸
- A recognition that churches in fire-prone areas are often small, led by ministers travelling in from other parishes, and that they struggle in times of disaster;
- A need for more local chaplains trained up and ready to assist;
- Fire plans for clergy written in consultation with laity and central administration centres so that everybody is on the same page;⁹

6 It was noted that for church leaders to actually turn up to debriefing sessions, these must be formal, organised events with direct liaising between organisers and participants.

7 One vexed incident was the unannounced arrival of a bus carrying evangelical Christians from outside the area, intent on conversion.

8 One young, inexperienced minister (not interviewed) was posted shortly after the fires in one of the most extreme fire-affected parishes in the state, to the detriment of the minister *and* his laity.

9 “If there are no plans in place, it can be very upsetting. One church member was recently at risk from bushfires and she was overlooked by the church, not deliberately, just due to a lack of awareness. Something was not done that ought to have been done.”



Snow in Kinglake after the bushfires.



Ruins of a community hall destroyed by bushfire with War Memorial in foreground.
Copyright: Steve Lovegrove



Aftermath of a firestorm. Burnt out car and houses, amidst eucalyptus trees.
Copyright: Robyn Mackenzie



Aftermath of a bushfire, dead and blackened trees.

“Traditionally the church does not partner well. What does it mean to love people and really get alongside them?”

Our call is not to shy away from community, but to love it.”



(iii) Support for clergy from government and non-government organisations in the event of disaster

What we heard

Clergy expressed positive outcomes from working with non-religious organisations, naming several in particular: Rotary Clubs (who provided catering at community memorial services convened by church leaders directly after the fires),¹⁰ the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, local GPs, the Army and Victoria Police. Support to emergency services was often reciprocal:

“Our first support was to the police. We’d bring water and food and ask if there was anything they needed. Everyone was saying they were the baddies but they had a job to do and had so many things to deal with.”

That said, clergy also identified significant gaps in consultation processes managed by government and other agencies that saw the church as an organisation that could take care of itself. One minister said churches in Marysville had been “frozen out” by Christine Nixon when it came to funding.

Clergy were quick to note that the church was not strong on linking with organisations outside of itself and that it needed to play a more proactive role in this, if it wanted to be included and consulted. One said:

“I see this as a grape vine. What is required is an outpouring of altruism and people willing to receive this gift. We have to have both. If the grapes aren’t connected to the vine, we lose touch with them and can’t assist.”

Others noted that the church needed to be more relevant to community which, even in “normal” times, are sceptical about religion and its motives:

“People in the community are suspicious of church people, and sometimes rightly so. Because if we’re not being totally altruistic, then we’re not looking at them as a person but just a prospective conversion.”¹¹

¹⁰ These memorial services received a great deal of positive feedback from community. In the case cited, about 600 people attended, 550 of whom were not church-goers.

¹¹ Ten of the eleven clergy interviewed prioritised pastoral support over evangelism and in fact dismissed it as inappropriate when working with trauma. “We were not interested in proselytising to people who were so vulnerable and soft.”

They said rural church leaders were disadvantaged because they lacked the skills of those in secular welfare agencies who knew how to write successful funding applications. “We were genuine, good-hearted folk – we just didn’t have the political lobbying skills the other welfare groups had.”

They felt overlooked by bushfire recovery agencies who came into fire areas but failed to recognise clergy as *valuable* resources with community connections that could be harnessed. There was also a strong sense that the church was excluded on the grounds of being a religious organisation and placed at a disadvantage, unable to help the communities as they wanted to. One minister said:

“*I walked into a community meeting during the fires and someone called out angrily, ‘What are you doing here?’ And I just said, ‘I’m just doing what you are all doing. We’re all doing pastoral work here.’*”

Several clergy felt excluded and invisible when it came to the question of who would conduct funerals for people who died in the fires. One minister said this was not surprising: “This is not a religious community. Most of the funerals were civil funerals and people were too in shock to take it in.” But another felt differently:

“*Funeral directors brought in civil celebrants and set up a stall in Marysville. I had the sense that people weren’t even offered the opportunity to have church funerals. I felt my place as a minister in the local community could have been respected better. I didn’t feel I was given entry.*”

Like many others, clergy agreed there was just too much red tape, and that the procedures set up by local and state government hindered the tasks they were meant to facilitate (e.g. stalled distribution of firewood). They felt government had opted for an increasingly bureaucratic mode of emergency management in which law stood in the way of grace, rigidity in the way of flexibility, micromanagement in the way of autonomy, and suspicion in the way of trust. As one minister put it:

“*In a disaster, micromanagement is a death; a massive ship to turn. The pastor finds themselves up against so much red tape. My first reaction to this is to usurp the authorities and rebel. There needs to be far more trust in people and the process.*”

This is no small matter, this difference between effective and defective trauma ministry. It requires that eighteen inch drop from the head to the heart that is at the core of Jesus’ ministry and most needed at times of crisis. It is something that can go missing if those who make the decisions sit at desks some distance from the fire zones, particularly in the higher echelons of church *and* government administration.

Given that tightly-reined social policy thrives within government infrastructure, it is probably asking too much for this to change radically or anytime soon. But I don't think these clergy are asking for that. What they are asking for is *a softening of the edges of this system to allow for the unusual chaos that is the disaster zone.*

This is also something the church might well heed in its own reviews of emergency responses to disaster events at parish and state levels.



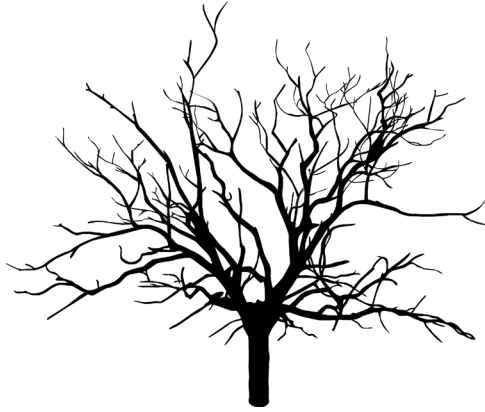
What they identified: strengthening links between the church and government and non-government organisations in the event of disaster

The following areas were identified:

- That secular agencies and government acknowledge the church as one of many not-for-profit organisations involved in bushfire recovery in times of disaster;
- A consequent need for community consultation in bushfire recovery to include the church alongside other local businesses and service providers;
- A need for secular organisations to recognise local church leaders as *valuable* resources whose connections can be harnessed;
- A need for the church to develop ways to forge long-term partnerships with secular organisations;¹²
- Access for church leaders and pastoral teams in bushfire recovery to the same support services available to secular organisations (counselling, debriefing), even if they elect in the end to seek these internally;
- A need for recognition by community, agencies, government *and* church organisations that “multiple connectedness forges partnerships and that interdependence is absolutely essential”;
- A revision of the assumption that churches were able to fund themselves, when in fact they had very little at all;
- Assistance for church leaders with writing grant applications for bushfire funding from non-church organisations; also, acknowledgment that this requires expertise and clarity. As a fire-affected minister working in the disaster zone, it is often difficult to write anything at all;¹³
- That churches and businesses work together to strengthen the local economy after disasters by, for instance, *local churches providing local community with vouchers from local businesses* as part of their pastoral outreach, rather than using businesses outside of the area.

¹² One minister said, “It’s a very common pattern for clergy to return to normal work once the emergency is over, and not talk to each other or instigate changes until the next time.”

¹³ Trauma psychologist Dr Rob Gordon talks of the how the brain works during trauma, preventing it from processing left brain information (survivors call this “bushfire brain”). <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2013/01/24/3676088.htm>



Part Two
Workshops for Clergy,
Lay Pastoral Teams & Laity

What we offered; How they responded

In October 2014, we commenced a series of workshops in response to stories and information provided by the interviews with clergy, designed to explore both practical and spiritual aspects of working with trauma in disaster events, with a focus on bushfires.

Responses to the workshops were invited from participants, but not insisted upon. Not all participants took up our invitation. However, all responses received have been included in this report.



(i) Working with Trauma Workshop 30 October, 2014

This full-day workshop was originally intended for the eleven clergy who participated in interviews. However, when only two responses were received, the sessions were advertised to a broader catchment that included clergy, lay pastoral workers and laity. These were predominantly from our five target areas: Whittlesea, Yarra Glen, Marysville, Healesville and Kinglake. This received a much stronger response, and the first workshop went ahead with a full house of twenty participants.

This is, quite possibly, a sign of the times, in that while several clergy initially expressed interest in attending further training in trauma, in reality the demands of their own parishes and other pastoral work precluded this. Clergy who did not attend declined, on the whole, due to having enough experience already, clerical commitments, leave of absence, ill health, family issues, general church busyness in the lead-up to Christmas and, in one case, denominational clashes and secondary trauma.

“*“Ministers,” as one put it, “are not necessarily equipped in this area, and they don’t necessarily have a deep understanding. I think it would be good for many of them per se ... But we live in a world where we have so much happening, it seems important to make time for such things, but we’re just too busy.*”

Even if few clergy were present, this was also a workshop, nevertheless, in which ministers could be supported *by proxy*; that is to say, by laity and lay pastoral workers taking back to their communities what they had learnt so that their churches as a whole might benefit. As one participant said in response to the day:

“*I’ve already talked to my minister about summarising the material for church members who would be interested. I don’t want to keep what I learned to myself; that’s not the idea.*”



Morning Session: Emergency Services Training

This was conducted by Stuart Stuart, State Manager of VCC Emergencies Ministry. It was designed to present a range of practical skills required for those who work with trauma in the event of disaster, with a focus on bushfires.

It was originally designed as a full-day workshop divided into two parts, Basic and Advanced (see Appendix for flyer). However, the “basic” component was soon dropped due to the fact that almost all of participants enrolled indicated they had some level of experience in working with trauma, especially in the bushfires.

The advanced session on Working with Trauma went ahead as planned, and covered the following:

- recognising the signs of those affected by trauma
- what to say and do, what not to say and do
- risks of burnout and the practice of self-care
- overview of emergency ministry, and pathways to further training
- the psychology of trauma
- the biology of trauma
- engaging a person affected by trauma
- dealing with long-term effects

Working with trauma is a vast and complex field, whose fence lines, if they exist at all, can scarcely be glimpsed. This workshop was only ever intended as a taster. But there was a real hunger from lay pastoral workers and laity in the room for information of this kind, and indeed, for more of it: a demand for solid, instructive, practical skills on working with trauma and disaster events. Most certainly, the workshop could have run over a full day, or two days, and have still sustained the eagerness of the group. Participants’ responses endorsed the workshop’s practical application:

“Thank you for the day. It was so good – a lovely balance between ‘theory’ and ‘personal interaction’. Stuart certainly has excellent knowledge and the ability to impart that knowledge very clearly.

I found the workshop’s main talk most enlightening as we still encounter traumatised people and useful ways ahead re rational cognitive therapy and other ways are so constructive. Also the research and facts about the stages of trauma were helpful, the whole discussion was encouraging in our journey.

If there is any area of work that I may be able to fit into, I would be interested to know about it – is there a web site for volunteers? ””



Afternoon Session: Personal Application to Scripture

Led by the author, this was a contemplative, scripture-based session in the context of working with trauma, with a focus on bushfires. Participants reflected on the Road to Emmaus as a “trauma narrative”, the disciples walking unknowingly with Jesus after witnessing his crucifixion. The group was invited to “listen and incline the ear of their hearts”,¹⁴ simply to sit in God’s presence, allow Christ to reach out to them through memory, and explore how their personal stories might be intertwined with salvation history.

It was hoped that a contemplative workshop would:

- endorse spiritual practice as a significant aspect of working with trauma;
- encourage a model for trauma training in which faith and practical skills were developed alongside each other and complement each other;
- build supports and equip lay pastoral workers with spiritual insights that had longevity and transform their approach to trauma work;
- provide a touchstone for further workshops of this kind to be developed and integrated into future trauma training.

Participants’ responses endorsed these aims:

“ I found this session very uplifting as I appreciated the readiness of people to share their feelings/experience in light of the reading. I was surprised at how the Road to Emmaus brought so many different responses. It was an excellent session, honest but gracious, culminating in each person’s own quiet worship of our God.

It was an excellent day, and I know I got a lot from both your wonderful use of scripture for the meditation and Stuart’s teaching. And, of course, everybody’s input added even more depth.

The Emmaus Walk meditation spiritually refreshed and stretched us in our thinking of a well known passage and the way God leads us through such times to greater faith and understanding. You led it very well. ””

In this workshop the sense of personal trauma as the impetus for working with others was

¹⁴ From *The Rule of St. Benedict* (c. 530): “To listen and incline the ear of your heart.”

also apparent. There were stories of domestic violence and sexual abuse. This, in itself, is unfortunately not new, but in our context draws attention to the role of lay pastoral workers as wounded healers, extending empathy and compassion to others through their own, transformative experiences of suffering.



(ii) Clergy Focus Group/Workshop 10 November, 2014

This session, facilitated by the author with the assistance of the Rev. John Bottomley, responded to the question: what can be done after disasters long term? It was primarily a response to clergy who indicated they would like to go deeper into the topic than the one hour interviews provided. Some said they felt they had really “only just scratched the surface of dealing with bushfire trauma.”

Ten of the eleven clergy interviewed attended the focus group, with the minister who had been most impacted by the church declining to attend. The group’s conversation responded to topics drawn from the original face-to-face conversations:

- How does the church respond to a disaster such as Black Saturday?
- To what extent did the local church support you?
- What was the relationship between your church and community in a disaster such as this? Between church and government?
- What was the relationship between your church and the broader denominational infrastructure? What are the worst and best case scenarios?
- What kinds of models best support clergy and congregations in disasters?
- What was the impact of the fires on your congregations?
- How can we discern the spirit of God in times of disaster? When working alone? When working as part of a group? Is there a tendency for hard work to replace prayer, or for prayer to replace hard work?
- What can you say about spiritual care, your own and others?
- How does society manage death and grief in the event of disaster?

The focus of the session was listening to the collective story of clergy working as the body of Christ, as St Paul writes in Corinthians, in the context of trauma. It also provided a chance for clergy to connect with those who had worked in similar conditions in the early days of the fires and its aftermath. Most significantly, it offered them a chance to debrief.

We estimate that the connections made here would not have occurred if YIRSP, as an outside body, had not sought to provide an occasion for them as part of this research project. The role

of the wider church in this way, as an ecumenical body that can offer debriefing and support for local clergy, is an important one. This is also something that VCC Emergencies Ministry could perhaps foster in the future.

Most of the responses received indicated that this session had provided the clergy with appropriate opportunities for connection and healing, as follows:

“ I found the focus group very useful because for the first time I was in contact with and hearing of the experiences of other clergy involved in bushfires. It was affirming and enlightening to hear what it had been like for others. It certainly reduced the isolation that I sometimes felt.

I found the day encouraging as I was able to share with others my experiences, and together we were able to identify some ‘holes’ in the process that could help us next time – God forbid there be a next time. I found it cathartic to tell my story and there was a sense of validation for me and, I believe, others.

It was remarkable to be back in the building where I stood in the early hours of Sunday, Feb 8th 2009!! It feels like about 40 years ago...¹⁵

I personally found it a very helpful process. It was good to reflect with a very disparate group of clergy about their experiences, both positive and negative. I’ll admit I wondered how the group would go, knowing many of the people, but we were well led, and able to stay on track.

I appreciated your role in leading the group’s discussion – and also John Bottomley’s presence. John, I think, provided a good theological perspective, with some helpful comments throughout.”

Only two negative responses were received from participants. In different ways, both indicate a level of personal uncertainty about their presence at the session, and convey a feeling that their needs were not met. This suggests it may be fruitful for future debriefing programs with clergy to run over two sessions, with follow up by a facilitator between sessions with participants who indicate uncertainty after the initial session:

“ The group was not helpful for me. Everyone else in the group had extensive fire experience, and my hands-on experience was minimal. I didn’t feel that I could share openly in this group. I was happy to contribute to the discussion but was not sure what

¹⁵ The Community Activity Centre where the Focus Group event took place had previously functioned as the Relief Centre in Whittlesea to which many people fled down the mountain, burnt, injured and traumatised, from Kinglake and its surrounds on Black Saturday.

fruit I should have been looking for. Wasn't the point to help churches better to respond to these kinds of events in the future? There is then no expectation that this will bear any fruit for me."

Regardless of responses received, all those who gathered here were people of the tender heart and, to acknowledge this, we ended the session with a ritual of healing, asking each minister to bless another around the circle, anointing with oil the hand or the forehead with the sign of the cross, as St James did to the sick. For those who work with trauma are, inevitably, also traumatised people who had seen great sadness and grief in their work. We wanted to offer them peace and healing, just as they had offered it to those they tended.



(iii) Creativity and Prayer Workshop 23 February, 2015

This workshop, delivered by the author, evolved primarily out of the question: how can we give ministers a sense of the arts that is more contemplative to engage with than simply as artistic endeavour? It was about fostering inner spirit, and ways of making connections with this that were prayerful and creative. As before, more responses to participate were received from laity and lay pastoral workers than clergy (only one of the clergy interviewed expressed interest in attending). But while the numbers were few, those who did respond were very keen. The group comprised two ministers from the fire areas (not interviewees) and two lay pastoral workers.

The session invited participants to explore the connections between poetry, story and scripture through a series of guided writing activities designed to link their everyday and spiritual lives. Milk and honey, for instance, were used as memory prompts for participants to create a piece of poetry or prose, and to reflect on this in light of Exodus 3:8¹⁶ and 4.12¹⁷ (See Appendix for samples of writing produced.) The workshop had a focus on working with bushfire trauma, but was not restricted to it. Rather, it was interested in revealing how creativity can illuminate the inner life of the spirit and reveal new ways to deal with the many challenges of the world.

What the participants said:

“This workshop provided a way into our inner selves. The way we were led to how God speaks to us through imaginative self-expression was fascinating. I learnt a lot and was ministered to by the Holy Spirit through the people being well led through the process. A most fulfilling experience.

¹⁶ “So I have come ... to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey”.

¹⁷ Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”

Thank you for creating a supportive and safe space, sensitive to participants' needs, non-judgemental and loving. This enabled us to courageously explore deeper dialogues and elicit intuitive responses. Through the stimulus of scripture we were given opportunities to understand the power of poetry and prose.

This workshop was cathartic for all involved. What stands out most is that it had a healing focus, which is very grounding. People involved in any type of disaster are usually taken along a "management pathway" by governments and initial responders. This is a good thing and necessary, but the "healing" aspect is often neglected.

Eating my words through tears was not like my usual composed self, but it provided awareness about the personal and professional effects of bushfire. Survivor guilt was apparent to me and only through the knowledge of the truth can real healing become a possibility it seems. In turn it allows us to be clearer and more effective in order to effectively guide other people's healing. ”

The above responses demonstrate that arts and faith in combination are significant for wellbeing in a secular world whose accelerated pace gives short shrift to creative and prayerful contemplation.¹⁸ It is a powerful instrument for inner healing which the church, perhaps, has yet to explore fully. As one participant asked:

“*Will there be another opportunity to have a creative ministries workshop for ministers and laity? I suspect not from what has been spoken but count me in if there is! I am prayerfully wondering whether a church-based program would still be useful in Kinglake to explore survivors' healing through the arts. ”*

Developing arts-based workshops for spiritual practice on an ongoing basis takes time and momentum. Once again, it would be unlikely for churches to drive these on their own. That said, this report recommends that organisations such as VCC Emergencies Ministry or similar incorporate these into training programs designed for clergy and lay pastoral teams who work with trauma.

¹⁸ One minister interviewed had delivered creative arts workshops in fire-affected areas, using dance and clay modelling, with transformative and healing results.



(iv) Social policy implications for workshops regarding working with trauma for clergy, lay pastoral teams and laity

It is probably unrealistic to expect local clergy in the aftermath of trauma to organise their own ecumenical debriefing and pastoral care – yet it has been worthwhile that YIRSP in this research project was able to model this to some extent. The workshop phase of the project also highlighted the difficulties of finding programs that suited clergy and lay pastoral workers; programs which called to them and elicited a strong, clear response to participate. There is an opportunity for VCC Emergencies Ministry to fill this role in the future, and meet its challenges, in order to:

- sustain the church’s long-term commitment to trauma recovery;
- ensure this commitment extends to the recovery of both church and community;
- demonstrates the wider church’s role as facilitator and provider of post-trauma training and support.

Ironically, secular agencies are often better placed to receive responses for training. Welfare agencies and human services departments often run mandatory sessions on trauma skills and wellbeing as a regular part of their work practices. It may well be that the church is less good at it, or less familiar with it. But certainly, if clergy find themselves too busy to attend, the energy of their laity is encouraging.

The church does not seem so intent on incorporating such training into the workplace. Yet it must incorporate it, not least because pastoral care is essential work, offering pathways to healing in the midst of despair and “holding” lives on the verge of collapse.

The church is as guilty of neglecting reflective practice as much as any worldly business.¹⁹ But it also has a responsibility to encourage and support ministers in making time for the practice of “care”. Only then may those who go about God’s work do it as fruitfully as possible and, indeed, achieve things beyond the limits of our comprehension.

¹⁹ Benedictine Monk Lawrence Freeman has published over thirteen books on the subject, most recently, *Why Are We Here* (2012).



Final Thoughts

As this report draws to a close, it seems timely to point out that despite the fact that clergy interviewed dealt with bushfire survivors afflicted by extreme grief and loss, all of them found in the darkness of their labour a sense of God at work in their midst. This includes the minister who felt abandoned by his church. “God’s not any denomination, you know,” he told me. “God’s still God.” In the individual conversations and the Focus Group debrief, stories of struggle and grace abound, from the son who insisted the local minister give his religious father a secular funeral to the parents who decided the scheduled baptism of their infant on the day after Black Saturday should go ahead.

Is this not, then, a pertinent calling for the church today in a world that knows, increasingly, the full force of natural disasters and destructive violence to:

- work alongside others outside of the church to meet the needs of disaster survivors?
- offer those who seek support rituals and language that give agency to the dead in ways that are meaningful and transformative?
- provide genuine long-term support in the months and years to come to those whose spirits have been broken by the deaths of loved ones in the event of disasters such as the day known as Black Saturday?

If so, then these eleven clergy have done their job, and done it well. It is our hope that this report will contribute towards encouraging future clergy, lay pastoral teams, laities and theological learning institutions to continue this work and, in doing so, provide comfort to those whom they seek to assist.



Recommendations adopted by the YIRSP Board on 12 March, 2015.

Note: Given that it is unlikely that church denominations will implement these recommendations on their own, it will be necessary for VCC EM to employ a person (or persons) to drive this undertaking and develop course accreditations in collaboration with YIRSP.

This report therefore recommends:

1. That YIRSP distribute the report to:

- The University of Divinity (UoD);
- All constituent theological training institutes at the UoD;
- The Victorian Council of Churches (VCC);
- Ministers for Emergency Services and Health at State Government level;
- VCC EM with approval to post the report on its website.

2. That YIRSP convene a consultation with all constituent theological training institutes of the UoD, so that the UoD and VCC EM can consider needs for:

- An accredited unit of study in trauma ministry;
- Ecumenical collaboration on the provision of short, ongoing education programs for Trauma Ministry, including Preparing for Trauma and Post-Trauma Recovery.

3. That VCC EM implements a “Policy for Natural Disaster Zones” to provide a statewide ecumenical focus on long-term pastoral and practical care. Elements of the policy may include:

- Invitations to a local ecumenical grouping of churches and/clergy to apply for recognition of their need for long-term support from Victorian churches;
- Recognition by Victorian churches of areas that require a minimum term of special needs support in recovery from natural disaster, say ten years;
- Funding sought to make a Position of Chaplaincy available so that a chaplain may attend the morgue in times of disaster to support those who have lost family and friends as a result of traumatic deaths;
- A commitment to
 - developing resources for church and community healing rituals;
 - the provision of specialist consultants for ongoing

- supervision for clergy;
- the external facilitation of post-trauma debriefing and collegial support for local clergy and leaders of lay pastoral teams;
- developing workshops on building cooperation, respect and understanding between church and community organisations;
- Negotiation with denominational bodies to reach agreement on authorising VCC EM as the agency responsible for coordinating local ministers (including spiritual support) and local churches in the immediate and short-term aftermath of a natural disaster;
- Negotiation with denominational bodies to reach agreement on authorising VCC EM as the agency responsible for coordinating these denominational bodies in their response to a natural disaster, including:
 - Provision of Basic Trauma Training for denominational officials;
 - Induction Training for the successful implementation of the policy.

4. That YIRSP apply to the UoD to research and develop the curriculum for a unit in Trauma Ministry, on the basis that there is a need for a less generic course to be designed specifically for this area.

5. That YIRSP prioritises the Theological Study of Trauma and Recovery from Trauma in the organisation's research agenda.

6. That VCC EM and YIRSP approach the National Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme to implement the recommendations in this report.



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The Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy gratefully acknowledges the Collier Charitable Fund for its generous donation to fund this project. <http://www.colliercharitable.org>

YIRSP and CMN would like to thank all clergy who generously donated their time and shared their experiences of the Black Saturday Bushfires.

We would also like to thank those additional clergy, lay pastoral workers and laity who attended our workshops, shared their stories and offered feedback.

Your contributions have significantly informed our research project, whose goal was to support and learn from local church leaders, pastors and congregations in the Murrindindi Shire who respond to those impacted by traumatic events. Knowledge gained in this report aims to better equip the church, theological training colleges, the Victorian Government and others who respond to trauma and disaster events in the future.

“ Just a note to say thank you for all your efforts in researching the churches’ and practitioners’ responses to the bushfire disaster.

Hopefully all these invaluable papers, books and anecdotal accounts of the bushfire will still be around to inform the next major event in Australia’s history.”

Appendix



Creativity and Prayer Workshop: Some examples from the writing process, by Barbara Wheeler-Scott

Milk

I remember the warm nurturing mother's milk, delivered to my primary school grounds. Allocated to each student, the fingernail lifted off silver caps eagerly and swallowed.

I remember the sour milky taste in my mouth, when the fires came. Unaware yet protected when the lid came off. As time went on my milk became a burnt bitter taste not easy to swallow. I could not celebrate it. Even my own life had been singed.

Honey

Glorious milk! Sweet to taste. A regular indulgence of mine! Why should I be so lucky? I've been through pain yet gained so much! The little faces of the children had not yet tasted bitter sweet victories. Homes in ruins cannot taste. Their lives fought hard for but lost. Bush has engulfed where they once lived and died.

Prayer

Dear God,

Thank you for life. Thank you for healing. Real healing where one can gnash one's teeth, not pretend nor intellectualise behind closed doors in secretive silent whispers. Like silent Chinese whispers. Like a horse whisperer. Meditation. Peace.

In Jesus name, Amen



Working with Trauma TWO FREE WORKSHOPS with a focus on bushfire trauma in the Murrindindi Shire

For clergy, lay pastors, pastoral teams & church members

Workshops will be facilitated through conversations rather than lectures

9am – 12pm. Working with Trauma (Basic)

An introduction to the skills required for working in the field, including:

- Recognising the signs of those affected by trauma
- What to say & do, what not to say & do
- Risks of burnout & the practice of self-care
- Overview of emergency ministry, & pathways to further training

1pm – 4pm. Working with Trauma (Advanced)

Also open to those who participated in the morning session. A comprehensive workshop for people with previous experience who would like to develop their skills. Topics include:

- The psychology of trauma
- The biology of trauma
- Engaging a person affected by trauma
- Dealing with long-term effects
- Further self care practices

Workshop Leader: Stuart Stuart, State Manager, Victorian Council of Churches Emergency Ministry. Stuart has been involved in Emergency Management for 25 years and responded to all major disasters in Victoria since 1993, including the Victorian Bushfires. He has spent five years as a CFA officer, led volunteers teams in large fire campaigns, and provided stress debriefing to emergency service workers. Stuart holds an MA in Emergency Management and is an accredited Mental Health Social Worker.

Bookings & enquiries: Lisa Jacobson E: lisajacobson64@gmail.com T: 0408 331 398

These workshops are part of a Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy project that aims to support & learn from local church leaders, pastors and congregations in the Murrindindi Shire who respond to those impacted by traumatic events. Knowledge gained will inform a Yarra Institute of Churches and theological equip those responding to



Report to the Victorian Council training colleges to better trauma in the future.

Supporting clergy & congregations responding to trauma



Thursday 30 October, 2014
Whittlesea Community Activity Centre
57 Laurel St, Whittlesea
9 – 4 pm
BYO lunch. Coffee & tea provided



poetry as prayer as story as prayer as poetry

**Monday 23 February 2015, 1pm – 4pm
Whittlesea Community Activity Centre
57 Laurel St, Whittlesea.
Lunch provided**

**A free workshop for clergy & laity!
exploring the connections between
creativity & prayer**

- **Poetry and story** are essential elements of scripture, which invite us to contemplate the living word of God.
- **In this session**, you'll be guided through writing activities designed to link your everyday and spiritual lives in the form of poetry, story and prayer.
- **Creativity** illuminates the inner life of the spirit and reveals new ways to deal with the various challenges of the world.
- **Designed for clergy & laity** who have worked with community impacted by bushfire trauma, but not restricted to it.
- **No creative writing experience required.**

Workshop Leader: Lisa Jacobson, Community Consultant & Author. Lisa has 30 years experience as an author and creative writing workshop leader. She has also worked extensively in bushfire recovery. Lisa facilitated the Whittlesea Bushfire Permanent Memorials, leads writing workshops with fire-affected communities, and consults with bushfire survivors and workers to honour their stories and document the experience of Black Saturday. To read some of Lisa's work, go to www.lisajacobson.org

The Yarra Institute for Religion & Social Policy offers this workshop as part of a project that aims to support and learn from local church leaders, pastors and laity in the Murrindindi Shire responding to those impacted by traumatic events. Knowledge gained will inform a Yarra Institute Report to the Victorian Council of Churches and theological colleges to better equip those who respond to trauma in the future.

***“Let everything happen to you:
beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.”
Rainer Maria Rilke***



“An important and significant report for the faith community, drawn directly from the experiences of ministers who worked at the front line of the Victorian Bushfires of 2009.

Its recommendations, when implemented, will strengthen supports for church leaders who respond to trauma, and those who work alongside them.”

Ian Smith, Executive Officer, Victorian Council of Churches

On 7 February 2009, the Black Saturday Bushfires devastated Victoria and resulted in Australia's highest ever loss of life from a natural disaster. The fires claimed 173 human lives, injured 5000 people, destroyed 2029 homes, countless pets, livestock, native animals, and over 4500 square kilometres of land.

This report is the result of a project that aimed to encourage and learn from local clergy and laity in the Murrindindi Shire who responded to survivors of Black Saturday impacted by trauma.

It will be distributed to the Victorian Council of Churches, church denominational centres, theological colleges, governments and other stakeholders to support and sustain church leaders in future disasters.

