A Catholic Community Response to the 2009 Bushfires

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A Catholic Community Response to the 2009 Bushfires

Ruth Webber & Kate Jones*

Introduction

This paper is about how three Catholic agencies carved out and adapted over time a role for themselves in assisting in the recovery after the Victorian bushfires of 2009. It tracks the process from the time the Archbishop of Melbourne commissioned Catholic Social Services Victoria to survey the bushfire affected areas and work out where there were gaps in services that the Catholic agencies could fill. A significant amount of funding was allocated to the provision of services by Catholic agencies for a period of up to three years in the bushfire affected regions. This was seen as a Catholic response to an extraordinary natural disaster. This was organisationally difficult because there are in excess of sixty Catholic welfare services in Victoria and it was necessary to determine who would be best able to meet the gaps and deliver appropriate services.\textsuperscript{1} It was clear that the aim was not to replicate or compete with existing services, it was to meet real needs and to do this in a cooperative and collegial way with existing players.

Literature review

Emergency Management Australia identifies community recovery as including information, communication, and personal support, and psychological and community development services. It defines community recovery as ‘the coordinated process of supporting disaster-affected communities in the reconstruction of the physical infrastructure and restoration of emotional, social,
economic and physical well-being’. As such, formal intervention is not a short-term effort. Community and individual needs for recovery may continue for years afterwards, re-occur in the face of other stresses, and take different forms. However, as Camilleri, Healy, Macdonald, Nicholls, Sykes, Winkworth and Woodward found in their study of the 2003 Canberra bushfires, recovery is also a problematic concept. There is a tendency in the literature to conflate mitigation, response, relief, and recovery, partly because the various stages can overlap.

Most studies of recovery focus on the experience of the survivors. McFarlane and Raphael described the effects of the 1983 Ash Wednesday fire in South Australia defining three separate phases: the impact phase when the fire was burning, the inventory or recoil phase, and the post-traumatic or reconstruction phase. They emphasised the importance of recognising the diverse experiences of the survivors and of understanding their individual needs. Carr, Lewin, Carter, and Webster examined the pattern of service utilisation following the 1989 earthquake in Newcastle, Australia. They found that there was generally a high level of satisfaction with the services, although medical services were generally perceived as more helpful than police, council or ethnic services. There were, however, a number of complaints about the distribution of financial relief by the Lord Mayor’s Appeal, which they hypothesised may have been due to this occurring in the ‘disillusionment phase’, which ‘is characterised by feelings of anger and grief, loss of support and breakdown of informal support networks, as well as withdrawal of professional assistance’.

There have been several publications using research conducted by the Australian Catholic University on medium to long-term recovery from the 2003 bushfires in Canberra, the capital of Australia. The report prepared for Emergency Management Australia concluded that community and individual recovery depended on formal and informal services, government and non-government agencies, and individual actions and relationships. The report also made recommendations about the management of recovery by communities and government, including the importance of community participation and long-term

services, the role of communications and the media, long-term mental health outcomes, and individual and community resilience. A later article focused on what helped and hindered community capacity building and emphasised the importance of networks within and across communities and neighbourhoods. The importance of community was also highlighted in Pooley, Cohen, and O’Connor’s study of the experience of residents in a bushfire-prone community east of Perth, Western Australia. To date little has been published on the 2009 Victorian bushfires. One exception is a study of media coverage of the Black Saturday (7 February) fires. There is little research on the role of agencies in community recovery from the perspective of how welfare agencies operated in a post disaster situation. The religious dimension in post-disaster recovery was examined in Cain and Barthelmy’s discussion of the role of churches in Baton Rouge, USA, following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The churches surveyed stressed the importance of advanced planning. Miller provided a valuable practitioner account written by the CEO of how Grampians Community Health (GCH), a rural health service, responded to bushfires on New Year’s Eve 2005 and Australia Day 2006. She concluded that the fact that GCH was an organisation already embedded in the community and with strong partnerships was a key factor in its success. Nor has there been much research into the Catholic social welfare agencies. Camilleri and Winkworth examined the history of Catholic welfare agencies, including the agencies that became Centacares in various dioceses, in Australia and concluded that their commitment to Catholic social teaching has meant that they were inclined to provide welfare services beyond the requirements of the state.

**Methodology**

The researchers were commissioned by Centacare Catholic Family Services Victoria to conduct research on the Catholic Bushfire Community Recovery Response over a three-year period. The aim was to document and analyse both the effectiveness of the strategies used to respond to the bushfire crisis in the relevant bushfire effected communities and the gaps in those strategies, and to develop principles and guidelines that will enable Catholic diocese to prepare for future natural disasters.

The study used a qualitative approach involving extensive interviews and participant observation. Participants from the three Centacare and other organisations were interviewed up to three times over a two year period about the Centacares’ activities and role. The third round of interviews has not yet been completed. Figure 1 shows a list of participants and their origins. With respect to participant observation, the research team attended meetings of the project steering committee and met with key people in the organisations for consultation about the direction of the research. This article reports on findings after the completion of the second round of interviews.

The researchers have conducted forty-eight interviews with thirty-five participants (fifteen males and twenty females). Thirty-one were in the first round of interviews and seventeen in the second round. Ten were from the area covered by Centacare Gippsland, twelve from the area covered by Centacare Melbourne, and six from the area covered by Centacare Sandhurst. Three representatives of state-wide Catholic organisations and four representatives of other state-wide organisations were interviewed. Where participants have been quoted below, they are identified by the organisation with which they were affiliated. Informal interviews were also conducted with twenty people from the welfare, government and church sectors who provided background information and advice during the course of the research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centacare Melbourne</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centacare Sandhurst</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centacare Gippsland</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Catholic agencies</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local government</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International recovery agency</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State government departmental</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (parish, school, clergy, church, medical)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants (n=35) were selected from a range of sectors, including social welfare agencies, local and state government, non-government organisations (NGOs), and church groups through non-random, purposive sampling. Participants were drawn from senior managers, middle managers and workers on the ground. Only those deemed to be ‘good informants’ were chosen to: (i) gain the best understanding of the role that the Catholic agencies under study played in assisting those who had been affected by the bushfires in Victoria; and (ii) identify and analyse the strategies used at each stage of the recovery process. This was in the context of the issues faced and the strategies used by agencies involved in community recovery.
The areas worst affected by the bushfires were in the Centacare Melbourne region and we concentrated our research there on the two towns of Kinglake and Marysville, which are both within the local government area of Murrindindi Shire. The fires in the Centacare Sandhurst area occurred in Long Gully, a suburb of Bendigo, and in the rural area of Redesdale. Both these communities fall within the City of Greater Bendigo. In the Centacare Gippsland area there were three fires; the Bunyip State Park fire affected areas within the local government area of Baw Baw Shire, and the Delburn Fire and Churchill-Jeeralang Fire areas within the Latrobe City area.

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Australian Catholic University. It was decided not to interview survivors of the bushfires because the research team thought they had been traumatised already and their input was not essential for the research project. Interviews were recorded digitally and later transcribed. The transcripts were coded and analysed by the researchers using the qualitative data analysis program NVivo with particular attention paid to recurring themes in the data. The anonymity of participants and organisations has been protected by removing or changing identifiable details. Data analysis was conducted collaboratively by the research team.

Results

After the bushfires the Archbishop of Melbourne created the Archbishop’s Charitable Fund Bushfire Appeal and invited donations. Recognising that post-disaster recovery is a long term process, the intention was that money from the Fund would be used to assist with both immediate and long term needs. The initial impetus for developing a response to the bushfire disaster came from Catholic Social Services Victoria (CSSV), the peak body for Catholic community service bodies in Victoria. CSSV worked with a number of member agencies in developing a response including Centacare Catholic Family Services, Good Shepherd Youth and Family services, Jesuit Social Services and the St Vincent de Paul Society. In February 2009 CSSV appointed a consultant to perform an initial needs analysis of bushfire affected communities that would result in a community development program that would be both integrated with Catholic social service agencies and local communities and be financially and otherwise sustainable.

Extensive consultations were held with many service organisations and government bodies—meeting with head office and regional representatives of the Department of Human Services (DHS), representatives of local government and councillors, local police, non government agencies, bushfire chaplains, school principals and regional staff of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne.

An aim was to develop a strategic plan for how Catholic agencies could assist in the bushfire recovery. The result was the formation of the Victorian Bushfire Community Recovery Response (Response) which presented ‘a proposed response strategy for the Catholic Church, in particular the Archdiocese of Melbourne, as an active player in the restoration of community and the renewal of parishes in bushfire affected areas’. The report strongly emphasised the need for a community development model over a three-year period that would result in a stronger and better community at the end of the time. It was recommended that Catholic agencies were to work in partnership with local parishes and other community organisations to address gaps in immediate welfare needs, meet community strengthening needs that were not currently being met and, thereby, to develop a sustainable community development response that left the affected communities in better shape after the bushfire recovery than they were in prior to the fires. It should also be noted that underlying the Victorian Bushfire Community Recovery Response was commitment to Catholic social teachings and Gospel values.

The recommendations of the Response were first implemented by Centacare Family Services Melbourne, which is part of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, covering the largest part of metropolitan Melbourne and some surrounding semi-rural areas. This was the region in which the most destruction and loss of life had occurred during the bushfires. Centacare Melbourne appointed the consultant as the coordinator in addition to recruiting seven workers, some of whom were counsellors and others were community development workers. There was an expectation that irrespective of the background of the workers the Response would adopt primarily a community development model. The counselling and community development programs offered by the Centacares began several months after the fires. Centacare Family Services Gippsland and Centacare Family Services Sandhurst also obtained funding from the Archbishop’s Charitable Fund Bushfire Appeal for similar community development and counselling programs. Centacare Gippsland is part of the Diocese of Sale in the south-east of Victoria and Centacare Sandhurst is part of the Diocese of Sandhurst in central Victoria. Both Centacare Gippsland and Centacare Sale cover large regional and rural areas with low population densities. All the Centacares traditionally provide programs and services to families, couples, individuals and communities. Each of these agencies is part of a Catholic diocese or archdiocese. As a result of the mapping exercise and its own model of practice, Centacare Melbourne had decided to deliver services and programs that were strongly orientated towards community development. By August 2009 the new staff members had been appointed and were able to begin working with bushfire affected communities. These were regions in which Centacare Melbourne had not previously had a physical presence despite the fact

that they fell into Centacare Melbourne’s geographical region. So while they supplied some existing staff to be involved in trauma counselling in the immediate period after the fires, they were effectively new to the area. In contrast Centacare Gippsland and Sandhurst already had staff and programs operating in or near to the fire affected regions and had been involved from the beginning, visiting recovery centres and offering counselling services. In March 2009 Centacare Gippsland used Commonwealth government funding to engage a counsellor while it developed a planned approach to filling gaps in services and meeting community needs. Centacare Sandhurst had existing programs and a physical presence in Bendigo. It also had been involved from the beginning in supplying counselling and support services and it used the Bushfire Appeal money to employ a counsellor and a community development worker who made up its Bushfire Recovery Service. All three Centacares, therefore, were committed to implementing a multi-disciplinary model where community development and counselling would work together. All three services had also come to this position after conducting needs analyses that showed them where there were gaps in existing services.

During the set-up phase it became apparent to the coordinator of the Response that communication with others working in the area was of paramount importance in order to avoid the duplication of services and the perception that they were encroaching on other agencies’ territory. Working closely with other agencies was essential in ensuring that duplication of services or distribution of goods was minimised. We were informed by local government and other informants that in the period immediately following the fires, the sharing of tasks or discussion about how resources might be distributed was sometimes limited or stalled and led to duplication. For example some bushfire affected people had workers from several agencies contact them and offer them counselling and other services. However, this duplication of services and resources had lessened by the time that the Response became operational. Centacare staff members were told that it was important to develop relationships with other agencies and with government and to find where there were gaps in services and where possible to coordinate with agencies already operating in the area. Some of the new staff appointed as part of the Response were unaware of existing recovery strategies or plans and that local government was a key player in the recovery process. They were briefed on these processes by the Recovery coordinator or by Centacare managers and strategies put in place to ensure that this information was disseminated among other Centacare staff.

The Recovery coordinator said: ‘My main objective has been to work in partnership with the local communities. It’s been very important to work with people in assessing their needs.’\(^\text{17}\) It was also recognised that even within one municipality there are a number of different communities, with different

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populations and needs. For example, the Centacare Sandhurst team came to understand that the two different communities it was working with had different characteristics and therefore adapted their model of service delivery to two sets of needs. There was also a general understanding that needs would change over time, and that standard counselling was not needed in the immediate aftermath of the bushfires.

The importance of local government in recovery was emphasised by a number of participants, although it was also recognised that the effectiveness of the each local government response was affected by the extent of its own resources and policies. Nonetheless, local government had the initial responsibility for emergencies within its boundaries, and participants argued that small agencies should ensure that they were in contact, as one Bendigo participant noted:

They need to be working closely with local government to get the services and the capacity that they are able to offer reflected within the Municipal Services Management Plan because when there is something happening, that’s exactly where local government goes to, they work from their plan.

Although the Centacares were new to the field, they were able to negotiate relatively quickly the services that they could provide and the role that they would play with existing players and with the community. A Centacare staff member said that:

… even though you were a month later than some of the other agencies that were on the scene, you didn’t actually come in and say this is what you need. You came in and said this is who we are and we’re open to hearing what it is that the community needs and how we can support that so I think it is about, not so critical about the timing, it is about the way the approach is made.

Relationships with other agencies also take time to develop, and there were instances cited where existing agencies were suspicious of the new entrants. As one Melbourne Centacare participant said: ‘There was a bit of tension that they thought we were competing or stealing their money’. Both new and old participants recognised that it took time to build trust with other agencies and the community and understand how other agencies operated. A manager of a large international disaster organisation stated that:

… there were a huge number of organisations that got involved that have never been involved in the past in the emergency service end of it or the emergency recovery end. I think that’s both a plus and a minus, essentially, obviously having more people, more organisations willing to commit and with skills able to contribute to the community’s
recovery is a good thing. The flip side is it gets crowded and at the end of the day the people who have been through the event will, by and large...just want what they want when they want it or need it and to them we’re just one big recovery system.

One local government worker also expressed concern about whether new players were there for the long haul and whether, when they had left, who would pick up the shortfall and what processes would be used for exiting the region and withdrawing the service:

My argument was don’t build new systems, strengthen the capacity of the existing systems to respond to the need because if you give some additional funding to Centacare, they are in the region, always going to be in the region and people will then establish a relationship because in five years time when everyone is going, ‘The bushfires, we’re all over it’, when the post traumatic stress and all these issues start to manifest for people who think ‘Oh I’ll go down the Hub, no the Hub is gone’, we need sustained effort over a much greater period of time...., I was a bit annoyed about some services being funded state-wide when they’ve never been in the region.

One of the attractive features about the three Centacares was that they were committed for a three-year period and would not leave a huge gap in services by leaving too early.

We were told by those from a range of different sectors who had had previous experience in natural disasters that it was essential to develop relationships with external bodies, such as local and state governments and the police, before an emergency rather than trying to make a connection during or afterwards. A senior staff member of a large international disaster organisation involved in the bushfires immediately after the fires said that:

I think one of the challenges is there are a lot of people who work in this industry on an ongoing basis in recovery and response and do their jobs well. When you get the big event happens there’s a lot of newer players that come in and I think there is always a bit of a challenge in terms of integrating what the newies do with the existing systems. So that I think is always a bit challenging from a systems point of view but in terms of support people getting out in the community I think, by and large, it is extremely good.

The three Centacares prioritised making links with other agencies and endeavoured to work towards a coordinated approach. The way the services were set up meant that staff had the capacity to change or adapt their roles as the
need arose. One interviewee described how he, as a worker, had moved his priority from establishing himself in the areas to networking with other agencies to liaise regarding how he could fill the gaps. A participant from Centacare Melbourne stated that:

Basically I think a lot of agencies are hoping to form more of a collaborative and cooperative approach to know what everyone is doing and to work with people rather than everyone being isolated and running the same programs or not knowing what someone else is doing and making sure we can plug everyone into the most suitable support services out there.

The interviews showed the importance of harnessing local knowledge and developing relationships with local organisations and building on what was already there. The Centacare staff and managers 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.

Assessing the changing needs was an on-going process which required continually checking with other agencies. We were told that in Centacare Gippsland one of their grief counsellors had been meeting with the Department of Human Services and various community groups that had established a working party to assess the areas of greatest need. As a result of the Centacares establishing relationships with other organisations, joint ventures began to emerge. A collaboration between Regional Arts Victoria, Fed Square Pty Ltd and Centacare Catholic Family Services, through the Archbishop’s Bushfire Appeal Fund, resulted in the installation of Federation Square’s old Big Screen in Marysville from 4 September 2009 to 4 January 2010. The screen was ‘aimed at strengthening community and to be a focal point for community entertainment, celebration and engagement, allowing for artistic and cultural expression’.18

Catholic organisations had an advantage in respect to other Catholic organisations in that they already had existing relationships with Catholic schools, parishes, and other Catholic organisations. This meant that one part of the wider Catholic community could make contact immediately with another to coordinate

a response and seek assistance. In preparing for a future disaster, church-based agencies, including schools and parishes, needed assistance in identifying what their role could be and the assets they could use, and how they could keep this information up-to-date and communicate to other players in the area. For example, schools could play a crucial role. They had buildings that could be opened up to residents and administrative staff who could assist in contacting pupils and their families. They could also be reception centres for goods that had been collected for distribution. Other church building and facilities were made available. The Sandhurst Diocese owns a chalet near the Ovens River which was made available to those affected by fires to have a free holiday. Schools also encourage students to raise money for the bushfires, for example the students at Mary MacKillop Catholic Regional College in Leongatha raised $2362 which was donated to the Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund. Some participants suggested that other Catholic organisations could help in the immediate post-disaster response period. For example, St Vincent de Paul was able to provide useful support to both other workers and to those affected by the fires. As one participant from Gippsland noted: ‘St Vincent de Paul [volunteers] have come across trauma in the past, they do visit very vulnerable people’. A bushfire chaplain mentioned the important role that Catholic schools and parishes:

… 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.

This participant recognised the significance of the school being able to contact pupils and also suggested that parishes could do more:

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, depends on the disaster but what we saw was that again 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.

Discussion

A matter mentioned by many participants was the importance of seeking out the community leaders and existing service providers and discovering what the community needed, rather than entering with a pre-conceived idea of how services would look. It was important to understand the social milieu and

cultural background of each community and to direct the response to the specific needs of each. A number of participants spoke of the need to simply sit and listen to people. By spending a lot of time in the community and attending community events Centacare workers were able to become part of the community and gain an understanding of the community’s needs and priorities. Counsellors became involved in assisting to organise outings or celebrations, a role distinct from but complementary to their normal one. This was not accidental; it was part of the community development strategy that had informed the Response from the beginning.

The Centacares were also fortunate in that their funding came from the Bushfire Appeal with a broad charter of improving communities and filling gaps; because of this they were able to respond flexibly to changing needs free from the normal restrictions of having to see a set number of clients per day or following a set program. The two to three year length of their funding meant that they were also seen as being there for the long haul, an important point in areas that had initially lacked services but were then flooded with them immediately after the bushfires.

Another important result of the Response was that it fostered relationships within the Catholic community, within local and state government and within other welfare groups. The Centacares were mindful of building relationships, of not being seen to poach on other agencies’ territory and of getting local people involved in planning.

Conclusion

The model that was chosen to establish a new set of services worked well. One of the reasons was the initial mapping work commissioned by CSSV and done by a highly experienced person. All three Centacares benefited from this decision and all took a long term view of the Response. As many participants mentioned, they were in it for the long haul. The Catholic community was also able to draw on other Catholic agencies and to make connections as well as non-Catholic agencies. However this was not an easy process. In the two country regions where agencies already knew each other a degree of trust and cooperation had developed over a long period of time between Catholic and other agencies. In Melbourne, where in the fire regions these relationships had not been built up, initial suspicion about others encroaching on territory needed to be addressed. What a disaster like this demonstrates is that no one organisation can act autonomously. A high degree of cooperation and, ideally, advance planning is necessary. Agencies may fear for their autonomy, and thus be wary of too much cooperation with others. This is a possibility that needs to be addressed in any planning for future recovery programs.

Another positive result is that the missions of Centacare and CSSV are about social justice and this aim in this project was kept to the forefront. We wonder if a less cooperative and more sectarian approach would have had the same success.