

The Victorian Council of Churches: its role in community support and development

The Reverent Sydney Smale, Central Coordinator Disaster Recovery, Victorian Council of Churches.

While the church has always played a part in the recovery of any community of which it is a part, its role as an organised response agency goes back to 1977. This occurred when the hailstones destroyed property, crops and the hopes and spirits of four hundred 'blockies' at Red Cliffs and Irymple, whose crops were ruined in a matter of minutes.

The widespread damage to property, homes and businesses dashed the hopes that the soon-to-be-harvested crops would make up for the disappointments of previous years. In response, the local Uniting Church clergy formed teams in and around Red Cliffs and Irymple to visit every home, business, farm and block in the affected area. Their task was to provide support, encouragement and where necessary (and at the level of their professional competency) counselling to those with presenting concerns. In the process they were also able to assess the needs of those visited and to pass on that information to other agencies, both government and non-government working in the area. Where appropriate, individuals and families were immediately followed up and the whole process repeated a month later.

The effect and impact was summed up at one of the final community meetings when a representative of the Department of Agriculture said, 'we have been helping people to mend broken vines. You, the church, have been mending broken spirits'.

One of the Uniting Church ministers, the Reverend John Hill, decided that the lessons learned should not be lost and he set about informing the church at the national level of the valuable role the church could play in disaster ministry. Funds were made available at the national level to enable John Hill to travel to every state to conduct seminars and workshops on disaster ministry and to establish task groups who could respond in the event of an emergency. The value of this work

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was underscored when bushfires hit on Ash Wednesday in 1983.

Teams of Uniting Church clergy and other volunteers in three affected states were able to respond immediately, and in Victoria the work was especially recognised by Premier John Cain in a speech to Parliament. John Hill, whose contribution was especially recognised, was awarded a Churchill Scholarship to the USA to further his knowledge of disaster ministry in community recovery. John Hill became recognised internationally as an authority in this field and was requested, for example, to assist in the aftermath of the earthquake in San Francisco in 1989.

This arrangement, whereby the Uniting Church was a response agency providing teams of visitors, continued until the response to the 1991 floods in Gippsland. With the passage of time, the movement of clergy and the resignation of John Hill, it was then discovered that the structure was no longer able to effectively respond.

A major difficulty experienced by any voluntary organisation that exists to respond to events that one hopes will never happen, or that happen infrequently on a significant scale, is to maintain the enthusiasm and commitment of its members. One of the major weaknesses of the model at the time was its reliance on the central coordinator. The present structure is based on a model of decentralisation, which should add to its effectiveness.

After discussions between several churches and the Department of Human Services, it was agreed in 1993 that responsibility for the work of the church in disaster ministry would be undertaken by the Victorian Council of Churches. The Church could now respond ecumenically in a decentralised form, with more responsibilities given to regional coordinators and including other faiths.

Tom Keating (1996) in an article on the October floods in the north-east of Australia, correctly observed that:

'... the outreach programs were extremely uneven. The framework for providing outreach and initial contact with people had been developed by the Reverend John Hill on behalf of the Council of Churches [should read Uniting Church], following the Ash Wednesday disaster. In the time since Ash Wednesday however, I think that there has been an increasing focus on formal debriefing services and a failure to attend to basic contact and community support which is required in the first instance.'

This observation was an accurate assessment of the role of the Uniting Church at that time. However, the new decentralised model, based on the Victorian Council of Churches has gone a long way in addressing that deficiency.

Not so accurate was his observation in that same article that the decline of the church in numbers in rural areas raises the question as to whether the local church can function any longer as a potent community network. While the local church may be declining in numbers, along with the remainder of social organisations and groupings in many rural areas, the work and effectiveness of the church extends far beyond the local community. The Church in all its facets is rich in human resources, has an organisation that can and has been mobilised from areas beyond that of the impact area and exists in the presence of its people, many of whom occupy leadership roles in the life of a community. Performing leadership roles in the life of a community, large or small goes beyond that of Sunday gathered worship and is often unrecognised as being the work of the church, a point, which the Keating article failed to acknowledge.

So much for the history of the involvement of the church. What exactly is its current role?

According to the State Disaster Plan, the role of the Victorian Council of

Churches is 'to provide support, counselling, information to affected persons and communities'.

During the past two years church members have:

- staffed emergency centres and 'one stop shops'
- provided support and counselling personnel at evacuation centres
- provided teams of trained outreach visitors for a needs analysis of people affected by the event
- left helpful information and corrected disinformation

The churches have also provided:

- qualified counsellors for the recovery process
- services of worship
- symbols of hope in times of grief and despair, such as the services after the Port Arthur massacre and on the first anniversary of that terrible event.

However, its major task has been to get information and to give information immediately after an event such as the bushfires in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges on February 11, 1997.

The fires destroyed 41 homes and damaged 45, of which 11 were subsequently pulled down. Three lives were lost. While that damage and destruction

was confined to a relatively small geographical area, the emotional impact of the fires embraced a much wider area. Many people living in the destruction had vivid memories of the fires of Ash Wednesday and some parents of young children were interpreting their own experiences of Ash Wednesday when they were children 14 years previously.

The first meeting of the Recovery Committee decided that homes well beyond the impact area needed to be visited to assess needs and to leave helpful information. Within 48 hours of being notified, regional coordinators across Melbourne activated 135 people who, along with local government and Human Services staff, visited over 1700 homes over the next 3 days. From the information gathered, a number of people and families were identified as requiring follow up visits and counselling. The church was able to provide a number of clergy and lay people who were themselves practising psychiatrists or had been trained in clinical pastoral care.

Church services and longer-term pastoral care were also provided by churches situated in the Dandenongs. This work of caring support and coun-

selling continues through the work of the various churches located in the Dandenongs and in any other part of Victoria and beyond where people hurt and the process of recovery continues.

Given that community recovery is a long-term process the church, as an important part of any community can and does play a very significant role. For it is a resource offered not for its own sake but for the sake of all the community.

Reference

Keating T 1996, 'The October Floods 1993: Lessons for the Management of Community Recovery', *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 36-40.

The Reverent Sydney Smale is a Minister of the Uniting Church and seconded to the Victorian Council of Churches to work as the State Central Coordinator, Disaster Ministry. He has wide experience, including 5 years as a parish minister at Warrandyte, a high-risk fire area in Victoria. He also lectured for 12 years in the faculty of Social Sciences at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. His main task now is training the teams of outreach visitors and coordinating follow-up counselling by clergy in the event of disasters and critical incidents.

International Sociological Association Research Committee on Disasters Samuel Henry Prince Award

The Research Committee on Disaster (ISA Research Committee 39) has established the Samuel Henry Prince Award to encourage and promote standards of excellence in disaster scholarship. This committee is tasked to honour new scholars who, through dissertation research endeavours, make a distinguished contribution to the field of disaster research.

Procedure

Awards will be made to individuals who, in the opinion of the committee, have made an outstanding contribution in their doctoral dissertation to the field of disaster research. Dissertations from any discipline are eligible for consideration. There will be no restrictions on the number of awards made within a particular period.

Awards may be made up to five years from the time of a successful defence. The definition of 'outstanding' will be the prerogative of the

committee. The committee will explain the merits of successful dissertations in an official announcement at each ISA/RCD World Congress of Sociology. There will be no publicity of dissertations that are submitted, and no explanation of why submissions have not been successful.

Copies of the dissertation and a nominating letter from either someone who is familiar with the dissertation's contribution to disaster research, or a letter of endorsement from the supervisor of the dissertation, should be sent to each committee member. In both cases, the letter should indicate consent of the scholar in question and provide an address to which the committee can address further correspondence. The letter should also provide the title, date and discipline of the dissertation.

The committee chair will acknowledge receipt of the submission by return correspondence, and will outline the procedures the committee will follow. In the event that a submission has been

supervised by a member of the committee, a replacement acting member will be engaged to consider the merits of the dissertation.

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Samuel Henry Prince was a Canadian scholar whose 1920 doctoral dissertation, *Catastrophe and Social Change*, is recognised as the first scholarly study of disaster.