



## With thanks to:

- Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
- Uniting Church Camping
- UnitingCare Connections
- Kildonan UnitingCare
- Wesley Mission Victoria
- UnitingCare Cutting Edge
- Kilmany UnitingCare
- Wimmera UnitingCare
- UnitingCare Wodonga
- Bendigo UnitingCare Outreach
- UnitingCare Community Options
- UnitingCare Goulburn North East
- Broadmeadows UnitingCare
- Kinglake West UCA
- Creative Ministries Arts Fund
- Yarra Yarra Presbytery
- Western Vic Presbytery
- Gippsland Presbytery
- Cottage by the Sea

And staff & volunteers, past and present, for your untiring work. Many stories remain untold.

The Bushfire Disaster Appeal was coordinated by the SHARE Community Appeal on behalf of the National Assembly. Administration costs have been covered by SHARE as a community contribution. If you would like further information about the allocation of donations or would like to read more stories about the work that was funded please refer to the previous Bushfire Disaster Appeal newsletters.

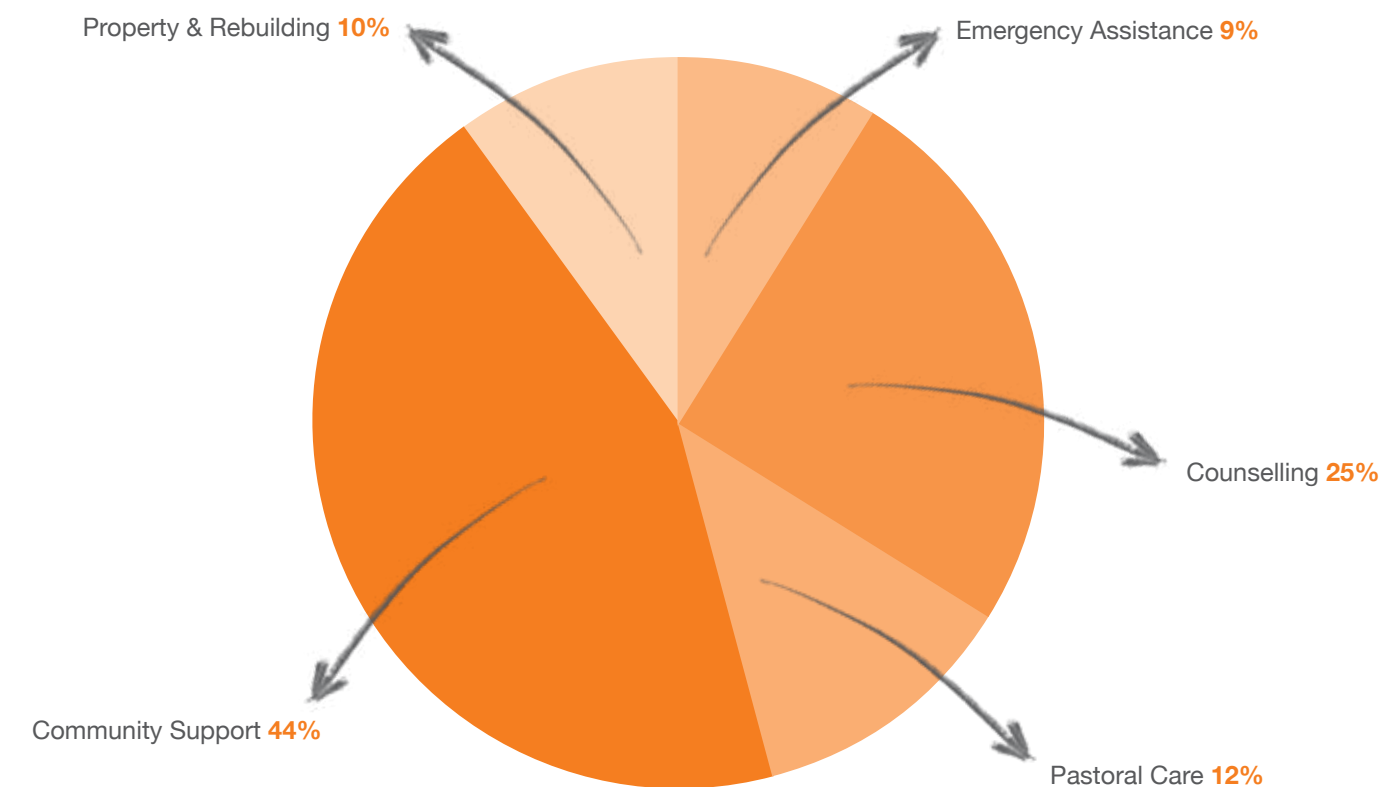
As we mark the 3rd anniversary of the bushfires we have made the decision to close the appeal confident that the ongoing needs of affected individuals and communities will be addressed by the agencies and congregations involved. The Uniting Church recognises that the rebuilding and recovery process for the affected communities and individuals is a long term, ongoing task. We remain committed to working closely with local groups to ensure the appropriate allocation of the remaining appeal funds to best meet their long term needs.

Thank you once again for responding to the appeal. And thank you to so many of our people who contributed in other ways – through work parties, chaplaincy, food packing, pastoral presence. I commend the survivors and their communities to your prayers; and those in our agencies and congregations who continue to minister amongst them in the name and spirit of Christ.

**Rev Alistair Macrae**  
President  
National Assembly,  
Uniting Church in Australia

For copies of these newsletters or further information please call **1800 668 426** or email [appeals@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:appeals@victas.uca.org.au)

## Bushfire grants go a long way



### Emergency Assistance \$174,500

In the days immediately following the fires donations to the appeal enabled Coles, Woolworths and Target vouchers for food, petrol, clothes and other essential items to be distributed. This meant people didn't have to wait for government funds and repeat their sad and terrifying stories to multiple people. Several UnitingCare agencies placed staff on the ground to provide emergency assistance and to coordinate the recovery effort.

### Counselling \$519,223

Due to the trauma and stress experienced by survivors there was an increased need for counselling services. The appeal funded grief, family, youth and relationship counselling provided by Kildonan UnitingCare and Wimmera UnitingCare and the training of additional Lifeline volunteers to meet the urgent demand for 24 hour counselling support.

### Pastoral Care \$258,971

Community Ministers were appointed to address the significant needs of the people in the fire affected regions and to help relieve the pressures the existing ministers were under. They provided pastoral care, assisted with coordinating the response of congregations and agencies in the affected areas, built relationships with Local Government and developed crisis recovery plans.

### Community Support \$847,725

A variety of programs and initiatives were supported including 'Our Place' a community recovery centre, the printing of two children's books based on the fires, childcare services, meals for volunteers and homework programs. Funds were also provided for 'Take a Break' camps and the 'Horses for Hope' program which addressed the issues of trauma and grief.

### Property & Rebuilding \$198,187

Thousands of kilometres of fencing were destroyed in the fires and the appeal supported the work of volunteers who replaced it. The purchase of replacement farm infrastructure including sheds, machinery and cattle yards was also funded along with the rebuilding of an animal shelter.

Thanks to the generosity of donors we have been able to support this work.



## Bushfire Disaster Appeal Wrap Up February 2012



*Kate and her family enjoying a well-deserved holiday*

## Gently pulling me back into the light

*Kate Wilson lost her house on Black Saturday and has written two children's books about the experience. The Wilson's home has been rebuilt and it has been a remarkable journey for Kate and her family as she shares below.*

Nearly three years after Black Saturday was etched into our collective memories much has happened up here in the bush.

For my family we have been able to rebuild and return to the place we call home. Far from an easy journey but one that reinforced close family bonds and a new found appreciation of having a sanctuary to return to.

I think the anniversary marks a loss of innocence for many. That casually accepted truth that your world is a safe place has been replaced with the fear of the "what if." This fear rears its ugly head as school children out playing are suddenly put on alert when they smell smoke. High winds on a hot day can put many of us on edge. Our fight or flight response to things is all too easily triggered.

Those who watched others suffer with great losses were left hoping they wouldn't be next. The strain of this time has had far reaching effects and left behind many deep scars but it has also brought to the fore a humanity that is often lacking in these modern times.

Friends and strangers alike showed such incredible compassion and support. I feel privileged to have been a witness to such an overwhelming outpouring of grace. Whether it was an understanding smile from a relief centre volunteer or unexpected meals delivered from people in our local parish; there were constant offers of help from many trying to make sense of such a big disaster. These events brought out the very best in many people. In a world where greed is often valued above all it was wonderful to see the true nature of human beings shine through. Where we all felt like one extended family and a sense of camaraderie was palpable.

**Continued overleaf >**



*Kate and Kirk at the launch of "Can we go home now?"*

I can't say that I ever want to go back and experience that time again but I do feel I have been given a precious gift; one that opened my eyes. We are all capable of such incredibly noble deeds. A disaster such as this gives us a chance to shine; and not in large grandiose ways but in small gestures that reaffirm our connections to one and other. And as my kids and I often joke it was the best spring clean we ever had.

Writing our story of that day started out as a way to thank family and friends. This simple telling of events and recognition of the many who helped us became much larger after the Uniting Church got involved.

The process of having 'Black Saturday was my Dad's Birthday' published began with contact with a UnitingCare Community Options case manager who was working on the ground with people affected by the fires. UnitingCare Community Options applied to the Uniting Church Bushfire Disaster Appeal who provided the funds for the printing.

In supporting my work the Uniting Church allowed me a much needed catharsis that in turn has helped many children and their families in fire affected areas. Every time I have

visited a school with this book there are countless children and adults alike who have their own stories to tell. Being able to share them is a wonderful way to connect.

*In supporting my work the Uniting Church allowed me a much needed catharsis.*

Several people have told me they think I'm very brave to write so candidly in my new book "*Can we go home now?*" I don't think I really had a choice in the matter. Writing this was a very powerful and emotional retracing of that year's events. The pen seemed to have a will of its own. All I could really do was hang on for the ride. I will admit that last line about the sun rising made me bawl my eyes out. It was an incredible relief to finish the book and that chapter of our lives.

Writing our story of that day started out as a way to thank family and friends. This simple telling of events and recognition of the many who helped us became much larger after the Uniting Church got involved.

I am currently delivering workshops in schools using the books. They enable me to promote discussion of a challenging time within our community; giving the children a forum to express

their hopes and fears for each new summer. Many still haven't come to terms with these events and need a healthy outlet. Although talking about challenging times the overall theme of these workshops is resilience.

As I look back I realise I am a lot stronger than I ever thought possible and paradoxically a great deal more vulnerable. This new found vulnerability is in itself a strength as it allows me new depths of compassion I never thought possible.

I think the final dedication in the book says it all;

*No matter who we are or what our circumstances at some point we all have a time when we descend into darkness.*

I would like to thank all the wonderful people who donated to the Bushfire Disaster Appeal. Their generosity made it possible for the Uniting Church to support my books and in doing so gently pull me back into the light.

Rebuilding an outer life can be tough when everything has been stripped away. Rebuilding your inner landscape is even harder.

Thank you for reigniting a spark that now shines even brighter than before.

**- Kate Wilson**

## Ministry in Adversity

Blackened tree trunks covered with renewed greenery line the roads into, and are scattered throughout, the bushfire affected region in Central Victoria, North East of Melbourne. In the drive through the winding ranges that lead into Kinglake, Rev David Howie recounts his time in placement as Community Minister to the communities affected by the Black Saturday bushfires.

Three years on from the devastating fires many in the community have rebuilt homes and some semblance of their former lives. However many continue to suffer the trauma of the 2009 disaster, and the long-term presence of the Uniting Church has been greatly appreciated.

"I just happened to be back from travelling overseas in the weeks before black Saturday," Mr Howie said.

"I rang my presbytery minister and asked if they had any supply ministry.

After Black Saturday I got a call and was asked to do two months placement at Kinglake West and Whittlesea."

The two months became three years through a Uniting Church Bushfire Disaster Appeal grant which engaged Mr Howie in a ministry placement which concludes at the end of March 2012.

Reflecting on those first days in the position, Mr Howie notes the difficulties faced by the community as well as his struggle to find the space to practice ministry in such an overwhelming environment.

"When I first arrived, sections of the fires were still burning," Mr Howie said. "It was a confusing time, there was lots of upheaval. Over the last three years the ways I've practiced ministry have involved clearing debris or damaged trees from people's properties. When you're painting someone's house that's when you can talk."

Local couple Chris and John Butterworth have spent three years in a caravan after losing their home

and narrowly escaping the fires with nothing but the clothes on their back.

"Before the fires we would have imagined that if church people came to help you they'd be trying to get you to join a church," Ms Butterworth said.

"The support of the local church has been brilliant. Like the meals program: it's not just that you don't have to cook it's the psychological support of getting together and having a meal. To me that is a true Christian."

The couple, both former school teachers, found the support of Mr Howie through this period invaluable. As they put the finishing touches on their rebuilt home overlooking the Kinglake ranges, both are quick to acknowledge Mr Howie's friendship.

*Three years on from the devastating fires many in the community have rebuilt homes and some semblance of their former lives. However many continue to suffer the trauma of the 2009 disaster, and the long-term presence of the Uniting Church has been greatly appreciated.*

"I know for John, talking with David can be a form of counselling, except it's better because David's a friend and he cares," Ms Butterworth said.

Mr Butterworth, a non-denominational Christian, also noted his surprise at the level of church involvement following the fires, "We can't emphasise enough how important the church engagement has been and still is," he said.

"Speaking with people can be a form of counselling, the church provided that and those things haven't stopped, they're still going."

Several localised initiatives were spearheaded by the small though hardworking congregation at the Kinglake West Uniting Church. The tiny church opened its doors and erected marquees, feeding and comforting those most in need.



*David Howie with Chris and John Butterworth*

"The Kinglake West Uniting Church became a refuge area and a community area – an area where government agencies could congregate, basically a community centre," Mr Howie said.

"It's one of the smallest congregations I've worked with – it's a handful of people who have really done some amazing things. They've done a remarkable job."

Bev Johns, coordinator of the community meals program at Kinglake West, is one of those faces. "Bringing people together for a meal can be a form of counselling," Ms Johns said. "It's not just about feeding people, it's about bringing people together – a friendly ear is worth its weight in gold."

As March 2012 draws near Mr Howie struggles to put into words the mix of emotions he feels.

"Enjoyed is not the right word but I have had a real sense of satisfaction in what we've been able to do," he said.

"It's remarkable the resilience I see in people, the incredible strength of character of those who have been directly affected.

One of the things that has been helpful for my ministry is some of the projects that the Uniting Church Bushfire Disaster Appeal have enabled. For example the appeal has been a big supporter of the Uniting Church fencing program and those sorts of really practical needs."

Mr Howie is quick to downplay praise for what he sees as his 'small role' in supporting the community and the work of the Church.

Often he stresses the most effective relief efforts are the localised initiatives driven by dedicated parishioners in the region.

"Top-down responses have caused some anguish in the community," he says.

"Though this has been contrasted by much of the localised Uniting Church work that is more of a community-based bottom-up approach to the local needs.

With Kinglake West it's the people on the ground – they're the ones who know what's going on with people, they're the people who will continue these sorts of things.

For example the local congregation decided it was important to continue meals so they really took it up. I'm talking about just four people," Mr Howie said.

During the past three years the work of various Uniting Church related initiatives have assisted many in the community in such a way that those support networks, indeed friendships, will live on in the community.