**VCC and VCCEM**

***The Victorian Council of Churches Inc*** *(hereafter, VCC)* is the peak ecumenical body for 30 Member Churches in Victoria. The VCC Standing Committee comprises the President, elected representatives of Member Churches, and the Executive Officer (ex-officio). It usually holds monthly meetings.

The VCC President and Executive Officer also provide leadership for the Victorian Church Leaders Network (VCLN) which meets four times a year.

The VCC aims to:   
\* express more visibly the unity of the churches willed by Christ for his Church   
\* to deepen their relationship with each other through shared programs, events, initiatives, service and witness   
\* build a depth of understanding and willingness to learn from and with other churches   
\* build networks in the community eg interfaith networks, justice-focussed networks

In response to God’s love for humankind, Christian Churches place a high priority on ‘loving neighbour’, with a strong ethic of solidarity, advocacy, compassion, and practical care.

***VCC Emergencies Ministry Ltd*** (hereafter, VCCEM)   
\* Compassion \* Care \* Community \* Dignity \* Hope

VCCEM is an organisation specialising in care and response in times of disaster. It aims to be the sector leader in the provision of a sustainable, efficient and effective psychological first aid and emotional spiritual care program. It provides compassion in times of crisis to disaster and emergency-affected Victorians through psychological first aid (PFA), emotional and spiritual care, outreach and personal support as part of the disaster and emergency response, relief, recovery and outreach services to all Victorians affected by disaster and emergency.

VCCEM has always been an ecumenical program and significantly has actively included volunteers from churches that have chosen not to join the VCC as a peak body. VCCEM is present for the whole community – those of faith and those who do not hold to a religious belief. The focus of VCCEM’s work is always the people impacted by emergencies; never the religious beliefs of the volunteer. VCCEM always accepts religious diversity among its volunteers so long as they are compassionate, mindful, and non-judgemental. There are now approximately 1,200 volunteers who are trained to respond to disasters in Victoria including volunteers from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh and Hindu faith communities[[1]](#footnote-1), who are trained in Psychological First Aid (PFA), Emotional Spiritual Care and personal support to respond to persons affected by disasters and emergencies in Victoria.

Area Coordinators and Regional Coordinators are trained and supported, strengthening local and regional responses and enabling volunteers to stay connected and engaged.

**Governance**  
VCC Inc is the single member of VCCEM Ltd which has been established as a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG). By law, a Company Limited by Guarantee does not have any shares or shareholders but instead has one or more members (who effectively own the company) and Directors (who act as agents of the member/s and are normally appointed by the member/s).

As the single member of VCCEM Ltd, VCC has the responsibility to approve new Board Directors. The VCC also receives an annual report presentation from VCCEM, and will be kept informed about any matters of concern that may impact the VCC’s responsibility as the single member of VCCEM as a CLG. The VCC, as a single member of VCCEM, also has the responsibility to guarantee to pay a set amount of money towards company debts[[2]](#footnote-2), and will be kept informed about VCCEM financial management and matters of concern.

**MEMBERSHIP** (2.1, VCCEM Constitution)  
  
Board Directors are appointed by VCC as the representatives on the VCCEM Board.

*2.1 Eligibility, application and admission*

(a) Victorian Council of Churches Inc shall be the sole Member of the Company at the time of registration under the Act, provided that it has given consent to be a Member.   
  
(b) No other person shall be admitted as Member of the Company unless:

(i) the person has been nominated by Victorian Council of Churches Inc;  
(ii) the person is committed to the Principal Purpose of the Company;

(iii) the person supports the Basis of the Victorian Council of Churches Inc;   
*(see VCC Basis on next page)*(iv) the person agrees in writing to provide a guarantee of not less than the Guaranteed Amount to defray such liabilities and expenses of the Company upon its winding up or dissolution;  
(v) the person submits an application for Membership in a form acceptable to the Board;

(vi) the person’s application for Membership is accepted by the Board (and such acceptance may be determined by the Board using any criteria as the Board alone may determine); and  
(vii) the name of the person has been entered in the Register of Members.

(c) The Board may decline any application for Membership and is not bound to give reasons why the application was not accepted.

**Basis of Victorian Council of Churches Inc** (2.Basis, VCC Constitution)  
2.1 The Council gathers together in pilgrimage Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures; seeks to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and commit themselves   
  
a) to deepen their relationship with each other in order to express more visibly the unity willed by Christ for his church, and  
b) to work together towards the fulfilment of their common mission of witness, proclamation and service.   
  
2.2 The principal purposes of the churches working as the Council are:   
  
a) to assist Victorian Churches to follow Jesus Christ, their Lord and Saviour;   
b) to bear witness to Jesus Christ in the community in mission and service;   
c) to assist the Victorian Churches to live out Christ’s prayer, that all who believe in his word may be one, so that the world may believe (John 17:20-25);  
d) to confer together as those marked by the Cross and Resurrection, sharing one another’s joys and sufferings (1 Corinthians 12.26) and bearing one another’s burdens to fulfil the law of Christ (Galatians 6.2).

2.3 The Victorian Council of Churches expresses these purposes by  
  
a) engaging in ways which respect our diverse response to God,  
b) being perceptive to Member Churches’ different perspectives with, so far as possible, resolution in unity with one another, and  
c) giving and receiving those gifts of our Christian faith which may enrich each other.

2.4 The Victorian Council of Churches expresses these purposes to others by  
  
a) sharing and promoting Christian perspectives on public issues;  
b) being a point of contact through which governments and other public bodies may consult Member Churches together, and a support for church leaders in their engagement with governments and other public bodies;   
c) determining common action on, and being a voice for Member Churches to speak in unison about matters concerning the faith they hold in common; and  
d) being a forum where those of other faiths and world views may engage in dialogue with Christian Churches on a basis of respect and honesty.

**Relationship with Government**VCCEM is a named agency authorised through the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) of Victoria, the State Health Emergency Response Plan, the State Relief and Recovery Plan and local Municipal Emergency Management Plans.

Much of the funding that enables VCCEM to continue its work comes from the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness & Housing (DFFH).

***The Emergency Management Manual of Victoria Pt 7*** describes the function of VCC   
(through VCCEM) as:

Relief / Recovery Activities

* Provide personal support, psychological first aid, and emotional and spiritual care, to individuals and communities, through the deployment of Chaplains and Personal Support volunteers.
* Provide personal support in a variety of settings including relief and recovery centres, outreach activities, community meetings, non-major emergencies single incident events and direct referrals by local government.
* Coordinate a multi-faith response to emergencies.
* Provide an advisory and training resource for community recovery and development for faith-based organisations and Local Government Authorities,
* Train and approve Chaplains and Personal Support Workers for deployment with VCCEM
* Assist the Department of Premier and Cabinet in the coordination of State services of worship and assist in the organisation of public memorials and gatherings to support the recovery of affected communities

The ***State Health Emergency Response Plan*** states:

A key focus of psychosocial support in the early stages of an emergency is providing personal support to affected individuals. Personal support is the provision of information, practical assistance, emotional support, assessment of immediate needs and referral to other support agencies and services as required. Relief agencies such as Red Cross and non-government organisations including the Victorian Council of Churches (VCC) have volunteers trained in psychological support who can be activated through municipal emergency management plans. Red Cross and the VCC can be deployed at short notice to relief centres or incident sites where it is safe to do so. Agency personnel undertake roles as defined in the municipal emergency management plan, which includes providing psychological support and other emergency relief services.

**History**

1977  
The Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry traces its origins as an organised response agency back to 1977, after hailstones caused widespread damage to crops at harvest time in the North West Victorian town of Redcliffs. The local Uniting Church Minister, the Rev. John Hill, was given permission by the local government to conduct outreach to his congregational members. Local Uniting Church clergy formed teams 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 was repeated a month later. The effect and impact were 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.’

1978

The VCC was first brought into disaster recovery work under DISPLAN[[3]](#footnote-3) in 1978 following an approach by Uniting Church Minister, Rev John Hill, who had decided that the lessons learned in 1977 should not be lost. He set about informing the church at the national level of the valuable role the church could play in disaster ministry with the provision of counselling and support services to disaster affected people. 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 that could respond in the event of an emergency.

The Victorian Council of Churches, through John Hill, was asked to chair the counselling sub-committee of the DISPLAN Welfare Plan. This committee later evolved to become the Personal Services and Counselling Sub-Committee.

1983

The value of this work 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. In Victoria, the work was especially recognised by Premier John Cain in a speech to Parliament.

After the 1983 bushfires, the DISPLAN Personal Services and Counselling Sub-Committee evolved to become the Community Recovery Committee.

1993

The kind of events the VCC attended between 1977 and 1993 included:   
\* Floods in Gippsland  
\* Anthrax outbreak -Shepparton  
\* Sieges in Doncaster and Mitcham  
\* Port Arthur massacre  
\* Ash Wednesday bushfires

The Department of Human Services (DHS) approached the Uniting Church to re-establish a full-time program to support disaster-affected individuals and communities, and to provide

outreach, psychological first aid, personal support and emotional spiritual care.

The Uniting Church negotiated with the Victorian Council of Churches (VCC) to manage the program and foster an ecumenical response rather than a denominationally based one. A contract between DHS and VCC was established at this time and continues to the present day.

The Uniting Church provided annual funding through BOMAR grants.

The then Central Coordinator, Rev Sydney Smale, provided lectures at the Australian Emergency Management Institute and at DHS workshops. Rev Smale also chaired the then Statewide Community Recovery Committee.

2002  
Rev Sydney Smale contributed to an international journal article entitled ‘*Reframing Risk, Hazards, Disasters and Daily Life: A report of research into local Appreciation of Risks and Threats*’ (see link [here](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/028072700202000303?icid=int.sj-abstract.similar-articles.6)). This paper introduced a series of research projects where the writers had examined contemporary management since 1900. This was a significant by the VCC Central Coordinator Disaster Recovery.

2004  
Rev Sydney Smale concluded his role as Coordinator of the Community Recovery program.

Rev Canon Graeme Winterton was appointed. He was instrumental in the formation of the Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Chaplaincy Network which eventually was named VCC EM. He negotiated with the Victorian Government and obtained the grant that funds VCC EM operations today.    
[Graeme retired from EM just before it was made a separate legal entity because of his health and passed away in 2019].

2006

The Community Chaplaincy arrangement was initiated in preparation for the 2006 Commonwealth Games to continue as an element within the State Emergency Recovery Plan (SERP).

2007  
VCCEM approached Buddhist and Muslim communities to invite their participation in the program. One Muslim Imam and fifty Chinese Buddhist volunteers were trained as a result. However limited staff resources (one part-time paid staff member in 2017) meant this development was not followed up.

Prior to 2007, VCC EM prioritised recruiting faith leaders as chaplains. This was based on an assumption that faith leaders would have greater availability to respond to emergencies than laypeople. Since 2007 VCC EM has continued to recruit and train faith leaders, but has greatly expanded the number of laypeople who are volunteers.

2009   
The VCC EM supported community recovery activities following the Black Saturday fires through the provision of Chaplains and Personal Support lay teams. Like many other agencies and organisations, the response was neither well co-ordinated nor integrated with State arrangements.

The Emergencies Ministry program grew steadily from 2009, when there were reported to be 280 chaplains across Victoria. More importantly, there was a greater retention of trained volunteers, due to:

* Improvement in the quality of training
* Increased usage of the VCC EM, meaning that new volunteers were more likely to be

deployed soon after training, thus consolidating their learning with practice.

* Leadership pathways for volunteers
* Leadership training

There was also a steady growth in the number of deployments (activations by local government and the Department of Human Services).

2011  
VCC EM applied for, and was granted, funding by the Department of Justice NDRGS for a multifaith project officer (MPO) for twelve months. The goal of the project was to “recruit, train, develop and retain an effective and available faith community volunteer resource for personal support, psychological first aid and emotional spiritual care during emergencies in Victoria” with a particular focus on volunteers from culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The importance of having a multifaith response to emergencies in Victoria was seen as essential, with Victoria being one of the most culturally, religiously, and linguistically diverse states in Australia. The cultural and religious diversity is most obvious in Melbourne. There is also growing cultural and rural diversity in regional Victoria:

* Regional Victoria is now highly dependent on overseas-trained healthcare workers, including many Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims from South Asia
* There has been a push to resettle refugees in regional areas. There are now Iraqi, Afghan and African communities in Shepparton, African communities in Warrnambool and the Latrobe Valley, and Burmese Karen communities in Geelong, Wonthaggi, Bendigo and Nhill.
* Religious diversity is more visible with mosques in most regional cities (three in Shepparton), two Buddhist monasteries in Bendigo, and Shepparton being home to Victoria’s oldest Sikh gurdwara.

VCCEM connects with the larger more mainstream faith communities to engage in recruitment, training and promotion. This includes the Muslim Emergency Management Organisation (MEMO). Unlike VCCEM, which is not a response agency, MEMO do respond to emergencies where they affect Muslim communities. While MEMO will continue its particular role in emergencies, MEMO volunteers will be deployed through VCCEM during the relief and recovery phases of emergencies. Muslim volunteers who complete VCCEM training are also accredited as MEMO volunteers. VCC EM believes it is very beneficial that Muslims can volunteer with VCCEM while maintaining a uniquely Muslim identity.

A new training manual was developed with clearer language, additional diagrams, photographs that reflected the diversity of training participants, and additional group and learning activities. The training manual also included a section, ‘Why we do it – spiritual reasons’. Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh volunteers were each invited to write a page explaining why their faith traditions motivated them to volunteer.

2012

VCCEM had two full-time paid staff and over 1400 volunteers. Attention was given to building its volunteer middle management. Two full-time staff based in an office in Melbourne cannot realistically develop and maintain a program and coordinate response to emergencies across Victoria. VCCEM relies on volunteers to coordinate its response to emergencies as well as maintaining a volunteer base. In addition to having volunteer area coordinators and regional coordinators who match local government areas and DHS areas, VCCEM has trained incident activity coordinators (IACs) who can coordinate the response to specific emergencies.

In 2012/2013, training sessions were held at Medicine Buddha Centre in Frankston South, Quang Minh Temple in Braybrook, Hoa Nghiem Temple in Springvale South, the Virgin Mary Mosque (Werribee Islamic Centre) in Hoppers Crossing, and Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassion Foundation in Box Hill. One reason for holding training sessions in these faith community centres was accessibility and familiarity. Also, holding training in temples and mosques demonstrated a commitment to becoming a genuinely multifaith program. If VCCEM had a secret agenda of imposing Christian faith practices on non-Christians, it would hardly be likely to give implicit affirmation to other religions by holding training in their places of worship.

VCCEM regards the volunteer’s faith as being integral to their volunteering. For Christians, volunteering is an expression of God's love in the world. For Buddhists, volunteering is a compassionate practice. For Muslim volunteers, midday prayers (for example) are not a diversion from training, but an expression of the reason they are there. VCCEM supports and honours appropriate religious practice.

2014  
VCC EM was called out on 28 occasions as well as participating in 19 emergency exercises.

The North West Metropolitan Collaboration requested that VCC EM adapt the Psychological First Aid training from 2 days to a more generic Personal Support overview. The purpose of this was to train Local Government emergency management staff, both experienced and new in the arrangements for the provision of these services during emergencies. The VCC EM program trained 157 Local Government staff across 11 Municipalities in 2014.

The Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry participated in a Melbourne University study into Mental Health Capacity in Victoria. The study demonstrated that VCC EM was well placed to provide the necessary support to affected individuals and communities. *“Key predictors of provider capacity to deliver interventions included previous disaster work experience and direct service roles. Victorian Council of Churches volunteers were significantly more likely to have PFA capacity, reflective of recent concerted efforts to up-skill this provider group, while psychologists and counselors were more likely to have SPR and/or MHT capacity”.* (Lennart Reifels)

2015

On 7 January 2015, the VCC Emergencies Ministry was established as a separate organisation[[4]](#footnote-4), as a Company Limited by Guarantee, with the Victorian Council of Churches (VCC) as the single member. The VCCEM and VCC continued to share the same office space at Causeway House, Melbourne CBD.

The VCC EM continued to grow in capability, capacity and profile and to work effectively and collaboratively with Local and State Government and other non government organisations.

2016

Rev Canon Graeme Winterton was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2016, “For significant service to the community through disaster recovery and emergency support ministry, and to the Anglican Church of Australia”.

2018

The VCCEM relocated in May 2018 to a separate office location in Port Melbourne.

During the 2019/2020 Black Summer fires, VCCEM deployed to 14 relief centres across the fire impacted areas, utilised 279 individual volunteers, which equates to 887 days of service.

2020

Code of Conduct approved (adapted from the International Fellowship of Chaplains, IFOC)

2024  
The staff team consists of 7 staff (2 full-time, 5 part-time) supporting the work of 1200 volunteers across Victoria.

**Leadership**  
The first VCCEM CEO was Stuart Stuart who served for approximately 18 years as a volunteer and employee of VCC Emergencies Ministry. Even after he concluded his role as CEO, he continued to serve as a volunteer for four years. “Throughout those years of service, I along with the volunteers and staff built something special, supported thousands of people affected by emergencies and contributed to how relief and recovery happens today. To the EM sector and VCCEM, thank you for allowing me to contribute in some small way to making the lives of those impacted by disasters a little less stressful”.

Rev Dr Stephen Robinson, National Disaster Recovery Officer of the Uniting Church in Australia, paid tribute to Stuart saying: “You’ve made an extraordinary contribution. Not just to the growth and consolidation of VCCEM but to disaster recovery chaplaincy across the nation through AVECA[[5]](#footnote-5)”.

Sophie Sexton-Bruce paid tribute: ‘What a great legacy. From my time as Manager Strategic Business, Emergency Management at the Department of Health and Human Services , I can attest to your unwavering and successful commitment to making VCCEM a fully recognised Victorian Government emergency relief partner. Later, as a Board Director at VCCEM, I saw first hand your leadership and drive to grow the organisation into a strategic agency with a clear vision and plan for the future, and your commitment and passion to its volunteers. Congratulations on 18 years of providing psychological support to disaster-impacted communities!”

**Rev Ian Smith** served as the inaugural VCCEM Chairperson from 2015- 2023. Ian also served as a volunteer for decades, engaged in teams to respond to emergencies. Ian was also employed as the VCC Executive Officer, enabling regular reporting to the Victorian Council of Churches Standing Committee. Ian’s commitment, pastoral sensitivity and vision was exemplary.

**Kellie Shewring** served as CEO from July 2020 to November 2023.

**Edmund Murphy**, previously Chief Operations Officer, was appointed CEO in December 2023.

**Volunteers**

The volunteer base has grown to 1200 trained volunteers. VCCEM training covers a variety of needs within the program. Volunteer training begins with basic training, which is two days in length. VCC EM is the only program training people in psychological first aid and emergency management arrangements over a 2 day period.

For volunteers who wish to go on and become a leader in the program, there are numerous additional internal training programs available, including:

•  Team Leader training

•  Coordinator Training for regional and area coordinators

•  Emergency Operations Centre training

•  Incident Activity Coordinator training

* Operations Officer training

All of these training programs enable the volunteer to move throughout the program in different capacities as required and as desired.

Additionally, as part of the recruitment process and strategy, volunteers often come to the program with skills, experience and formal qualifications in other relevant fields.

Some of the other training that VCC EM volunteers bring to the program include:

•  Mental Health (Social Work, Psychology, Youth Work, Drug & Alcohol)

•  Grief & Loss

•  AIIMS

•  Emergency Management Liaison Officer (EMLO)

•  Pastoral Care

•  Nursing

•  Engineering

**The Victorian Council of Churches: its role in community support and development (1997)**

*By the Reverend Sydney Smale, Central Coordinator Disaster Recovery, Victorian Council of Churches. A paper presented at the Emergency Recovery Forum, Darebin, November 27, 1997 and published in the Australian Journal of Emergency Management****.***

While the church has always played it is 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 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 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 AshWednesday 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 counselling 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 Reverend 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.

Stuart Stuart, https://www.faithvictoria.org.au/images/stories/building-multifaith-multicultural-capacity.pdf

1. Volunteers are drawn from those faith communities who are members of, or eligible for membership from the following communities, and are actively involved in ecumenical or multifaith works: Victorian Council of Churches (VCC); Multifaith Advisory Group (MAG); Jewish Christian Muslim Association (JCMA); Faith Communities Council of Victoria (FCCV); Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV); Buddhist Council of Victoria; Hindu Community Council of Victoria; Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria. The provision of eligibility to volunteer is also in line with those of the National Council of Churches Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO). See http://www.ncca.org.au/partnerships/139-australian-partnerships-of-religious-organisations [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ($10, *1.6 Constitution*) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Disaster Plan (DISPLAN) means a step-by-step sequence of previously agreed roles, responsibilities, functions, actions and management arrangements for the conduct a single or series of connected emergency operations, with the object of ensuring the coordinated response by all agencies having responsibilities and functions in emergencies. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.acnc.gov.au/charity/charities/ee22c361-3aaf-e811-a95e-000d3ad24c60/profile# [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Australian Volunteer Emergency Chaplaincy Alliance (AVECA) is a Network of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). This allows for the practical engagement of the Churches with Federal and State governments and community and raises the value and importance of spiritual care in community recovery. AVECA supports capability and capacity building through coordinated and networked resources in the churches. The alliance consists of Victoria’s VCCEM, Tasmania’s TCCEM, New South Wales’ DRCN, ACT’s ACTDRCN, South Australia’s D&DRMSA, and the emergency ministries in Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)