

## **Dr Lisa Jacobson, author of *Working with Disaster: Clergy & Bushfires*, responds to Victoria's Emergency Services Commissioner, Craig Lapsley, at the launch of this report.**

As the author of this report, it's a privilege to have Craig Lapsley, as Victoria's first Emergency Services Commissioner, officially launch and endorse it. Thank you, Craig, for your kind words. It goes without saying, and yet it must be said, that Victoria's Emergency Services, and the CFA in particular, are the backbone of bushfire response in this state. On February 7, 2009, when Black Saturday occurred, I lived very close to the fire front. That was six years ago, and I've been working in bushfire recovery ever since. I've had the privilege of working with a range of fire-affected community members and workers, including the eleven ministers interviewed for this research project. My own brief was simple: to listen, reflect and report. *Working with Disaster* contains samples from the stories which ministers have told me. It is my hope that these will touch readers, especially those in positions to make change and take up the formal recommendations proposed by the Yarra Institute at the end of the report.



*From left: Ivan Peterson, Dr Stephen Ames, Dr Lisa Jacobson, Craig Lapsley, Revd John Bottomley and Stuart Stuart.*

Trauma psychologist Dr Rob Gordon says those who experience disasters such as the Black Saturday bushfires divide time into three categories: before the fires, during the fires and after the fires. Local clergy, lay pastors, pastoral teams and laity all had significant

roles to play in these three phases, the last of which is ongoing. The ministers I interviewed all worked with community alongside many

non-religious organisations whose members also practiced pastoral care, assisting with practical, emotional and spiritual tasks that knew no bounds. Some ministers worked at a practical level, chain-sawing, mending fences, and so on. In that 'doing' there were many fire-affected men who opened up because, as we know, men tend to talk best while they are doing other things. Other ministers sat at kitchen tables, in cafes, relief centres or anywhere they could, providing support for bushfire survivors incapacitated by loss.

Whether clergy were assisting with practical, emotional or spiritual tasks, each has dwelled in the wells of other people's loneliness and loss, grief and shock. Each has listened to survivors telling the stories of their trauma and telling them again until, as psychologist Rob Gordon says, these stories became woven into the fabric of memory and healing began to take place. All of the clergy I interviewed said they were not prepared for the extent of the trauma they witnessed despite the depth and breadth of their previous expertise. Many bushfire survivors lost families, some lost children and babies. All saw things one should never have to see.

I think of survivors as drifting on dark oceans with no land in sight. I think of them sitting at the bottom of wells where no light shines. And I think of the ministers I interviewed, whose own stories I've had the honour of hearing, as sitting with people until a light at last appears at the top of the well, until the shore reveals itself on the other side of that dark sea, until a new story arrives that encompasses the old one but provides a new pathway, even so.

I'd like to thank the ministers who took part in this research project as well as the ministers and laity who participated in our workshops. I want to thank the Collier Charitable Fund, whose generous donation made this report possible; Rachel Rule for design and layout, Jason South and Larry Challis for cover images and Rebecca Young for internal graphics. Thank you to the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy (in particular, Bruce Duncan), who underwrote the project; to my reference group: Reverend John Bottomley (Creative Ministries Network), Ivan Peterson (Combined Christian Churches of Whittlesea) and Stuart Stuart (Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry). I am grateful to Emergencies Ministry, which is keen to drive the report's recommendations forward at government, denominational and educational levels. It is my hope that this will strengthen supports for clergy who work with trauma in communities afflicted by future disasters.