



**MEDIA RELEASE**  
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## **COLLABORATION WILL ENHANCE CHURCH'S DISASTER RESPONSE**

A new whole-of-Church initiative to help people and communities recover from the current bushfire crisis will set the blueprint for how the Catholic Church responds to domestic natural disasters in the future.

Earlier this month, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and a number of other national organisations encouraged Catholics to donate to the Vinnies Bushfire Appeal, which is supporting people who have lost loved ones, homes, property and animals.

Those national organisations, representing parishes, religious orders, social service agencies, schools, hospitals and aged and community care providers, have spent several weeks working collaboratively in response to the deadly bushfire season – which is not yet over.

“Our response to the bushfires, and the drought that has exacerbated the fires, has demonstrated once again the collective power of the Catholic Church to respond to disasters in all sorts of ways,” Bishops Conference president Archbishop Mark Coleridge said.

“At its core, the Catholic Church is about people, about families, about parishes, about school communities, about ministries that proclaim and live out the Gospel of Jesus. Most of those ministries are local, but there is a national – and universal – dimension of the Church that can sometimes be under-utilised.”

The new national collaboration is called CERA – Catholic Emergency Relief Australia – and will serve as a coordination point for Catholic agencies responding to natural disasters.

The founding organisations are the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Catholic Religious Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia and the National Catholic Education Commission. Other Catholic organisations are expected to join the collaboration soon.

Ursula Stephens, the CEO of Catholic Social Services Australia, said organisations like CatholicCare, Centacare and Vinnies are embedded in local communities and are therefore trusted and able to deliver the right services.

“One of the Church’s key social teachings is about ‘subsidiarity’, which means that we empower local communities to respond to their realities as they best see fit,” she said.

“Alongside that, though, sits ‘solidarity’, which compels us to see the needs of others and work collaboratively to respond to those needs. That response can be most effective when it’s coordinated and focused.”

Dr Stephens said while the national Vinnies appeal continues to be a channel for people to support Catholic agencies responding to the bushfire crisis, CERA will also receive donations that will be distributed through a recovery grants application process managed by Catholic Social Services Australia.

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“We are establishing the appropriate governance, accountability and transparency measures to ensure that those who see the Church as a key responder to national emergencies know financial and practical support is going to those who need it,” Dr Stephens said.

“CERA will allow us to help people on the long road to recovery from this ongoing bushfire crisis and to mobilise as soon as our country is struck by another natural disaster – mindful that it’s sadly a matter of ‘when’, not ‘if’.

“This is ultimately about us being more responsive in a crisis. This is faith in action and a call to follow our Christian vocation.”

One of the key features of the CERA website, which was launched today, is the volunteer management portal. It will allow organisations to list volunteer opportunities for people looking to provide practical, material and financial support in the journey of recovery.

“Our parishes, agencies and ministries are constantly receiving requests from individuals and families who need a place to stay, who need new clothes or appliances, who need a listening ear,” Archbishop Coleridge said.

“Much of that support will come from government, from Catholic and other charitable organisations, but volunteers can carry out some of the urgent tasks to help people in their daily lives.”

Archbishop Coleridge said Catholics, individually and collectively, continue to pray for an end to the current fires, for rain to quench drought-stricken lands, for those affected by the fires and for those on the front line of responding to the fires.

Dr Stephens said CERA’s focus will be on domestic natural disasters, noting that Caritas Australia is the Church’s agency tasked with responding to emergencies overseas.

Visit the CERA website at [www.cera.catholic.org.au](http://www.cera.catholic.org.au)

*Catholic Social Services Australia CEO Dr Ursula Stephens is available for interview. Please contact Gavin Abraham on 0408 825 788 to arrange an interview.*