

Wildfires Down Under

After the worst wildfires in Australia's history, Christians are rushing aid to hundreds of victims left injured or homeless.

✖ **Feb. 12, 2009** – As the death toll continues to climb from the worst wildfires in Australia's history, Christian leaders are rushing aid to hundreds of victims left injured or homeless by bushfires that ravaged the southern state of Victoria last weekend.

Suffering families desperately need finances to tackle rebuilding efforts, according to organizers of a relief effort launched by the Australian Christian Churches (ACC), formerly known as the Assemblies of God in Australia.

"[Too] many people are now facing the heartbreaking task of rebuilding their lives without loved ones," said Brian Houston, national president of Australian Christian Churches and senior pastor of Hillsong Church in Sydney. "Our hearts and prayers are with all of those affected by these horrible fires."

In an e-mail to Hillsong supporters Wednesday, Houston said 10 percent of all giving during this coming weekend's services will benefit bushfire relief efforts while 100 percent of all donations from a special offering at a leaders meeting would go to victims and their families.

Houston is also urging people to help by giving online "I would encourage all of you to dig deep, and more than ever, pray for the people affected in such a tragic way," he said.

Australia's record-breaking heat this summer along with strong winds helped fuel the hundreds of bushfires, some of which were flagged as possible arson by authorities. The fires destroyed more than 750 homes, left 5,000 people homeless,

burned 1,100 square miles, and incinerated small towns near Melbourne, Australia's second largest city, the Associated Press reported.

More than 200 people are feared dead.

Jared Haschek, a technician for Integrity Music who lives on the outskirts of Melbourne, said the wildfires last Saturday came within miles of his home and that just north of him an entire family, which included three young children, perished in the fires.

The family attended the Whittlesea Assemblies of God church, and many from the congregation didn't learn of the tragedy until midday Monday, said Haschek, whose nearby Yarra Plenty church sent donations to be distributed by the Whittlesea church.

"Our country is in shock, it's just been a harrowing week," Haschek said. "Yet, we are seeing God moving in this. We are looking for opportunities to reach out to our community, to speak into people's lives ... we're praying that ultimately God will still use it for His glory. We can't see the big picture, all we can do is trust him."

On a blog post Houston said that during days of such uncertainty in this world, Christians must be quick to offer support and compassion during tragic circumstances. "In times like these, it is often easy to ask why things like this happen, and to look heavenward for answers," he said. "Too often we try to understand these tragic times, and turn to political statements and moral codes to help us grasp the depth of these situations. It breaks my heart to hear of people making broad, bold, and often very disillusioned statements equating such tragedies as 'retribution from God.'"

Houston's comments could be alluding to some controversial statements made this week by the leader of a Christian ministry based in Dandenong, Australia, a suburb of Melbourne

and not far from the fires.

In a press released issued on Tuesday, Danny Nalliah, head of Catch the Fire Ministries (CTFM) and a pastor ordained with the Assemblies of God, asked whether the fires were a consequence of abortion being legalized in Victoria last October.

Nalliah said in a dream last fall he saw fire everywhere, with the flames burning high and uncontrollably. "With this I woke up from my dream with the interpretation as the following words came to me in a flash from the Spirit of God – His conditional protection has been removed from the nation of Australia, in particular Victoria, for approving the slaughter of innocent children in the womb," he said.

Nalliah, who sponsored trucks packed with clothes and food to help devastated communities, asked people to donate blood to the Red Cross. On Wednesday he launched a seven-day prayer and fasting campaign for the nation of Australia. "How much does it take for a nation to return to God?" Nalliah asked. "Can we stop the fires? Yes we can. But it will take God's children to rally together and repent and cry unto Him."

Meanwhile, Houston said he believes the heart of God "breaks over these unfair and often unjust circumstances."

"I believe in a God who is full of mercy and grace," Houston said. "A compassionate Saviour who wants to build people's lives for the better, feels the pain of loss as His own, and who cares deeply for those that are hurting, alone, widowed and orphaned."