

Religious communities respond as bushfires rage in Australia

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [January 29, 2020](#) issue



Australian wildfires on November 12. (Flickr/Rob Russell)

As people around the world rang in the new decade, Australia continued to burn for a fifth straight month.

Before 2020 was a week old, 24 people had died in the bushfires that burned across more than 12 million acres of land, and thousands more had been evacuated.

In response to the national emergency, Australian faith communities have worked to provide support.

In November, Anglican Aid, the aid agency of Sydney Anglican Church, began soliciting donations in order to provide immediate services like clearing burnt land and replacing food spoiled by power outages. Anglicare's Disaster Recovery Response has been providing clothing and bedding to people and assisting with displaced pets.

In December, the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference extended indefinitely its national prayer campaign against drought, which normally takes place in November.

“In some dioceses, practical responses like school fee relief or support with rising utility bills can ease an increasing burden for families,” Columba Macbeth-Green, bishop of a large diocese in New South Wales, is quoted as saying on the bishops’ blog. “But in a Catholic context, prayer must be a part of our response.”

The Uniting Church in Australia has been providing chaplains at evacuation centers and, like the Anglicans, launched a special campaign for disaster relief.

The devastation wrought by the fires has fueled a conversation about the growing global climate crisis; 2019 was Australia’s driest and hottest year on record, with temperatures in December topping 105 degrees. But the fires have also yielded a discussion about the long reach of colonialism and ethno-racism—specifically the way the Aboriginal practice of cultural burning has been disregarded.

Cultural burning, which involves deliberately setting a cool, controlled fire, has historically been used in Aboriginal communities to encourage vegetation growth. It also helps to protect land from unplanned fires. But as Dennis Barber, an Aboriginal cultural fire practitioner, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Australian government frowns upon the practice.

“It’s important that people recognize that it is valid, it does work, and what we’re looking for is some support for this from higher levels of government,” he said.