

Canberra firestorm and the demand for care

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On January 18, a Saturday afternoon, a firestorm swept through suburbs of Canberra, Australia's Federal capital city. Over 500 houses were destroyed. Four people died, many sustained burns, and thousands were left homeless.

The savage bush fire was caused by lightning strikes in nearby state forests and fueled by scorching temperatures, prolonged drought, tinder-dry bush, and cyclonic hot winds. Flames swept into the city, raining sparks and turning day into night with thick smoke.

Under-resourced fire and police authorities had no time to prepare properly for the disaster. Vital infrastructure was damaged. The huge telescopes of Australia's historic Mount Stromlo Observatory, which had revealed significant secrets of deep space and contributed to the world's knowledge of the universe, were destroyed.

On that day, Merran Williams, a young woman who volunteers as an English tutor under the Adult Migrant Language Scheme, drove her car into one of the worst fire areas. She was concerned that one of her pupils – a Burmese refugee whose family was renting a house in the suburb of Duffy – would not understand important safety directions that had been given in English.

Driving to Duffy through dangerous conditions, Merran said, "I felt fearful. It was hard to see. The smoke was so thick and black. I wondered if I had made the right decision. Should I go on, or turn back? Then I started praying with a statement made by Mary Baker Eddy: 'We have nothing to fear when Love is at the helm of thought ...' (*Miscellaneous Writings 1883-1896*, p.113). This powerful idea immediately helped me counter the fear. I felt calm. God was with me. I was going there from good motives – to help others. He would keep me safe.

"As I got closer, I didn't expect to get to their house. I thought police or fire crews would have the road closed by then. To my surprise no one was there, although just after I turned into the street, it was blocked off. I pulled up outside the home. The father and teenage son, wearing only T-shirts and shorts, were in the garden trying to put out the fire. I called out, 'get in the car. We need to go!' After some hesitation they did so, and we drove to safety.

"We didn't realize the extent of the devastation until the next day when the smoke had cleared. The petrol or gas station in their street had been destroyed. Houses too. But this family was safe and their home had been spared. I was so grateful. They had suffered so much already."

In the days following this disaster, other stories of courage and amazing protection emerged. Considering the immensity, suddenness, and ferocity of this firestorm – the worst in Australia's history – it's now considered a miracle that so many people were unharmed.

For Merran, although the immediate fire crisis passed, it was important to keep praying. She said this passage in *Science and Health* encouraged her: "God is at once the centre and circumference of being" (pp. 203-204).

As Canberra is laid out in a circular design, she found it reassuring to think of the entire city as being encircled in God's care. That's a thought anyone can pray with – anywhere.

There is much to be done today in this "bush capital." Houses and lives need rebuilding, homes need healing, and losses need restoring. City officials will have to look at issues of public safety and fire prevention. As I receive calls from people in New Zealand and Scotland asking how they can help, I'm reminded that the outpouring of love and prayer for the people of Canberra will bring comfort and help them move forward.