Introduction
There is no shortage of challenges facing Community Service Organisations (CSOs) at the moment. These include services that are underfunded and are experiencing higher levels of demand than they have the capacity to cope with, higher levels of expectations from governments and other funding bodies, increasingly prescriptive contractual requirements, compliance and reporting mechanisms, the costs of quality and accreditation processes and many more. In Victoria, CSOs are currently facing the most significant series of reforms we have seen in years, covering homelessness, family violence, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health, disability and out of home care services. All of this potentially sits underneath a guiding framework that could reshape the way government and the sector interacts internally and with each other. Whilst the effects of this contextual hurricane will impact us all, it’s not the focus of what I want to speak about today.

I’m particularly interested in how the Christian character of those organisations that deliver the vast majority of social services in Australia both shapes their programs and creates a range of internal and external challenges. I want to explore some of those impacts through two lenses – one deductive and the other inductive. In terms of understanding the distinctive character of Christian CSOs, I want to share some of the results of a minor research project that I engaged in a few years ago. One of the desired outputs of this research was to be able to articulate the ways in which faith-based services differed from those provided by government or non-faith-based CSOs. The second piece of work I want to share today includes some insight into the challenges facing my own organisation, The Salvation Army. This work forms the basis for a PhD that I’m undertaking at Monash University, in which I will explore the relationship between The Salvation Army’s identity as a church and its role as a major provider of social services in Australia. Whilst this project is strongly rooted in the experience of The Salvation Army, I am quite sure that there will be elements that can be inferred across to other Christian denominations.

What are the distinctive characteristics of faith-based service provision?
This first section is based on survey material and interviews with staff and service users in almost 50 services across three countries: the US, UK and Kenya. It demonstrates that a critically important factor to the contribution of faith-based organisations is how the spiritual and religious dimensions shape the fundamental values and character of services provided.

These Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) consistently demonstrated a number of characteristics which stemmed from an organisational orientation towards human values. These included ways of working with highly disadvantaged people that were more resilient, longer term and extended beyond the ‘basics’ to recognise the importance of ‘quality of life’ activities and experiences.

Furthermore, the life-changing and transformative potential which was seen in positive engagement with FBOs, was significantly enhanced when local faith communities were able to provide a network of support and care for socially isolated individuals. The combination of clinical and non-clinical care...
which was seen in the best examples of this allowed people a safe environment in which they could experience healing and wholeness. People also gained a vital sense of belonging and feeling valued when they were given the opportunity to make their own personal contributions to the lives of these communities.

**SIGNIFICANT THEMES**
The following themes are indicative of characteristics commonly seen amongst the wide variety of services visited. Though each service had its own strengths, and not all exhibited every theme, these distinctives came through again and again. Whilst it is acknowledged that many of these are not unique to FBOs, the relationship between the characteristics and the values-based motivation of FBOs does suggest that they are far more likely to occur in these contexts.

**Theme 1 – Community**
The opportunity for positive engagement with a faith community, such as a church, provides a range of potential benefits which are distinctive to this particular context. Whilst there has been a growing recognition of the importance of community in providing socialization and supportive networks, the significance of faith communities which intentionally gather around common values and have a sense of meaning and purpose in life is less likely to be mirrored in other community groups. Faith communities can offer a safe place for the marginalized and the vulnerable whose lives have too often been characterised by desperation and violence. They provide an environment where hope can be restored and resilience encouraged in the midst of the most difficult circumstances.

**Theme 2 – More personal interactions**
One of the common features of highly disadvantaged people is that most, if not all, of their relationships are defined by professional contacts (with their caseworker, their drug counsellor, their psychiatrist, their doctor). Most have suffered significantly from the effects of social isolation and marginalisation. In addition to, or sometimes as an intentional part of, their normal service delivery, many FBOs had program elements that provided opportunities to interact with the wider community and establish meaningful and positive social relationships. These included interactions with volunteers and interns, other non-profit organisations, clients from other welfare agencies, alumni from the program and communities of faith.

The contribution of volunteer and broader community interaction has a dual effect that is invaluable. Firstly, it demonstrates to a person that someone cares for them who is not just doing their job – negating the unjust accusation that professional staff just demonstrate care because they are getting paid to do so. Secondly, it extends the capacity of the organisation to do good beyond its own boundaries in ways that may be more natural within the community.

**Theme 3 – Extensive Community Partnerships**
Even though the idea of working through partnerships and community networks has become increasingly accepted as foundational throughout social service sectors, FBOs often appeared to be at a distinct advantage in the size, scope and variety of their partnerships. For some, this was due to the longstanding presence of the faith community within the local area. For others, it was because of individuals associated with the FBO or faith community who had personal networks which complemented the professional networks accessible to everyone else.
Theme 4 - Holistic approach
All programs demonstrated an awareness and commitment to looking after the whole person, not just a single segment of their lives. This holistic perspective recognises the need to begin at the point that clients find themselves when they come to the program. Thus, service plans are tailored individually with the client (as far as the program is able to cater for this) and revised on a periodic basis. Where spiritual elements were included in the program (Bible study, devotions, chapel), these were nearly always an optional component which clients could opt in and out of at their own discretion.

Theme 5 - Commitment to the most disadvantaged
The various target groups which were identified for all services consistently articulated a commitment to people with high and complex needs, commonly dual or multiple diagnoses - most often mental illness and drug addiction. Despite the difficulties that these clients often present, most programs tried to work from positive reinforcement rather than a punitive basis to deal with negative behaviours. When removal from the program was considered necessary for the good of the client or others in the program, attempts were made to refer to other programs and at times re-entry into the program was possible at a later date.

Theme 6 - Long term commitments
It has been noted that long after most other agencies (sometimes including governments) have concluded their work with natural disasters, it is the faith-based organisations that are still working co-operatively to clean up the mess and help rebuild the lives of individuals and the community. This is consistent with previous investigations which have noted that on the whole, "services provided by FBOs are more likely to be longer in duration than comparable secular organisations" (Comparative Views on the Role and Effect of Faith in Social Services)

This longitudinal support offered is also critical to seeing positive transformation in the most difficult situations.

Theme 7 – Respect of personhood
An essential value which characterises the work of FBOs is the recognition of all human beings as divine creations. For some this was clearly articulated as a social justice precept which mandated high regard and excellent service for all those ‘created in the image of God’. This sense of equality inherently deconstructs paternalistic models of welfare in favour of capacity-oriented approaches.

Theme 8 - Flexible funding arrangements
Another common feature was a reluctance to accept gaps in programs and a desire to find new and innovative responses to client needs despite existing funding limitations. A range of solutions to this difficulty existed including help from advisory boards, corporate partnerships, community fundraising and entrepreneurial activities in addition to applying for government and philanthropic grants.

In many cases, it appeared that FBOs were actually significantly subsidising government programs which had been grossly underfunded. There were frequent stories about promised increases from government officials that never happened as well as occasions of funding cuts where there was still an expectation or requirement for similar or even increased outputs on significantly less funding.
The Salvation Army – a Christian CSO with an identity crisis?

In the second half of this presentation, I want to explore an issue that I am currently grappling with in my own denomination. However, I don’t think that either the causes or consequences of this issue are entirely unique to The Salvation Army and I strongly suspect that those of you from other denominations will have something to relate to here as well. I do think, though, that this issue is particularly concentrated in The Salvation Army and is therefore becoming unavoidable to notice. The issue is one of identity – who are we? The answer to this question will come very differently depending on who you ask. At the very least, there are two dominant claims to identity: an external opinion, which sees The Salvation Army as primarily a significant provider of social services to Australians in need; and an internal viewpoint, that sees The Salvation Army as primarily a denomination of the wider Christian church that also engages in some social work.

There are two very noticeable symptoms of this identity crisis that can be readily picked up from a review of Salvation Army literature. The vast majority of academic writing over the past 30 years focuses on the history of the movement. In the past 15-20 years, some of that focus has begun to shift towards ecclesiological matters. I can’t help but wonder if we keep looking back at where we’ve come from and looking around to see what other churches are doing because we no longer know who we are.

I want to mention three dimensions of this identity problem that will need to be addressed in order to move forward to a more cohesive and confident future.

1. Missional engagement

The vast majority of missional activity in The Salvation Army happens in our social programs. The Salvation Army’s international mission statement announces a dual mission “to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and help those in need without discrimination”. Are these two separate but equal activities? Where resources are limited, how could we prioritise the temporal over the eternal? Is evangelism just one aspect of mission or is it the only indispensable aspect, without which we should not engage in other service activities? For some people within the movement, social programs have been seen as a secondary function, or perhaps something which we might do in order to ultimately link people into the church. As social work has become increasingly professionalised, it has become further and further removed from congregations. In addition, this work has become something that other people do on behalf of the organisation. The uncomfortable reality is that our 95% public approval rating doesn’t come from our church presence but from our social engagement. Australians have much greater trust in charities than in churches. Perhaps it’s just as well they don’t know that they’re often the same thing.

2. Theological foundations

There’s a range of theological issues that complicate the mission question. However, perhaps the top two are eschatology and soteriology. By eschatology, I don’t mean the end of the world as such, but more generally the direction in which things are heading: What is God’s overall plan and how are we going to get there? The Salvation Army was birthed in the British revival period of the mid-nineteenth century. It was a time of fiery preaching and of ecstatic religion, but it was also marked by highly pragmatic approach to the problems of poverty. Our founder, William Booth, spoke confidently of the realities of heaven and hell, both in this world and the next. As our congregations have moved onwards and upward, we’ve largely lost touch with the idea of a present hell. Most of
our people live reasonably comfortably in this present age, so questions of divine reward and punishment get more easily pushed towards eternity. This, in turn, impacts upon how we understand that most critical of subjects: salvation.

Despite the fact that on a daily basis, people accessing our social services are being saved from homelessness, poverty, violence, social isolation and much more, this correlation has largely escaped our theological rhetoric. We’ve narrowed William Booth’s idea of a ‘boundless salvation’, which had a very real impact on this present life, to one which almost exclusively exists in some faraway place after we die. Until we can meaningfully grasp the theological point of our social service activity, in a way that doesn’t relegate it to ‘second best’, we’re likely to be stuck with a dualistic and problematic identity.

3. Contextual changes
Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we’ve failed to pay proper attention to the changes in the world around us. We’re still mourning the demise of Christendom, even while we continue to act sometimes as if it still exists. We can’t figure out why 21st century people don’t want to come to church anymore, why young people are leaving in their droves and why governments don’t listen to the church like they used to.

At the same time, in our social work, many of the changes that have taken place in our society are seen as a positive. Whilst the church sees secularisation, pluralism and even sometimes modernisation as enemies, all of these have positive aspects for the social work professional whose practice is grounded in human rights, individual choice and agency, and social progress.

Conclusions
While our churches decline and social work grows, questions of identity will persist. How can we be true to our historical roots while governments increasingly contract with us to provide services according to their own needs? The rarely spoken fear is that we will become the next YMCA – an organisation that does good works in the community but has lost all of its distinctively Christian character.

Christian community service organisations do need to be vigilant at this time, with challenges pressing upon us both from without and within. The world around us is changing, whether we like it or not. We should honour and respect our past, but if we only look backwards we will fail to keep up with those around us. On the one hand, we face becoming a quaint relic of antiquity and on the other an indistinguishable arm of government. Navigating the path between these two perils is the challenge before us. Let’s see what we can do.