

# HEARTLINES

The Centre for Values Promotion

## What's Your Story?: **CHURCH QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK**

Apostolic Faith Mission Emmanuel Assembly - Case Study  
1 October 2019

# Prologue

The Apostolic Faith Mission Emmanuel Assembly Church is situated in the Ikageng Township in Potchefstroom in the North West province. The parishioners are largely from the immediate surrounding community.

When the church started, it had only fifty congregants, and services were held in a shack. As the church grew, it bought a stand in the township, although services continued to take place in the shack. Eventually, a mission house was built, and the congregation stabilised to about 100 consistent members. While the relative success of the church has been hard-earned, one of the downsides has been that some members of the community have been resentful of the church's relative wealth in the largely impoverished community.

## Introduction

Heartlines is a Johannesburg-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) that focuses on promoting positive values with a view to transforming behaviour. In 2016, Heartlines initiated its 'What's Your Story?' (WYS) programme that aims to build empathy through the personal sharing of stories.

WYS is promoted in different contexts, including in workplaces, educational settings and in faith-based organisations. In faith-based organisations, WYS seeks to achieve the following goal: promoting the virtue of love (empathy) to create a vibrant, welcoming and connected church community that interacts with the wider community with relational intentionality. In 2017, Heartlines brought Singizi Consulting Africa on board in order to evaluate WYS. This case study was developed as part of the evaluation and was based on the following interviews (face to face and telephonic) and focus groups:

- Two care pastors
- A focus group consisting of approximately 40 members of the church who have been involved in WYS.

## Changes Resulting from WYS

In the course of developing this case study, we explored whether WYS had contributed to changes amongst members of the church congregation, the church leadership and even more broadly. We also explored the reasons for any changes. Church leaders and members all indicated that WYS had resulted in personal changes and had changed the way they interact with others both within the church as well as beyond.

### Personal changes

Generally, members felt that WYS was an “eye-opener” in changing their perceptions about other people. Many of the members said they learned that they should not judge before hearing other people's stories. Church leaders shared the following views:

*“[WYS] was useful for me personally. I learned to interact better with people. I learned that I must listen and not interject while a person is sharing and not impose my opinion”.*

*“My personal view is that it impacted and helped me in my work as a counselor. It really helps me. I have counselling sessions with church members, and, from the WYS approach, I have learned to be objective and not subjective while listening to other people's stories”.*

Many respondents shared personal stories of how they changed the way they related to other people, and often in the context of the workplace. One respondent mentioned that she judged a co-worker because she was employed but was always begging for food or clothes. The respondent started to treat her differently after coming to understand that she was in a financial predicament and supporting several children. Another respondent had a poor relationship with her young neighbours until she chose to take the first step to get to know them better. She asked them how they were coping after they lost their mother and came to understand that they sometimes acted the way that they did because they did not have the guidance of their mother.

### Connecting with others in the church

Respondents reported that relationships between church members had improved considerably, and the relationship between church leaders and members also strengthened.

There are the so-called 'family churches' (or cells) within the church. These family churches are made of small groups of parishioners. Respondents reported that within these groups, WYS played a huge role in building people's confidence in interactions with each other. As one respondent commented:

*"Having these sharing sessions with our selected family churches is what has made us realise that we need to know, before we judge. It has developed our views of each other. And this has made it easy to use the same attitude with our communities as well."*

Youth within the church were also encouraged to share stories with each other during their youth sessions. Respondents indicated that those who were usually more isolated were approached by the more outspoken young people. In this way, new connections were established, and new relationships built. Further, they started to engage in new activities together. Respondents reported that they have monthly braais (barbeques) and, after choir practice, they sit in a circle to share how they dealt with challenges since they last met. The pastor of the church indicated that he had noticed more interactions among the youth than before WYS.

Some participants expressed that they had always been close as church members, but they now feel closer because they know each other better. Even those who did not get along with each other have made changes. An experience was related about two sisters who were not getting along. After watching the movie and listening to the pastor's sermon about hearing others, they were seen together engaging in a conversation and laughing. This reportedly took the whole congregation by surprise because they were known foes.

One member mentioned the issue of trust. She said because of storytelling, there was a mutual trust between members of the church. Another member commented:

*"I connect more with fellow believers now. Even our family church group is closer because we know what we all have faced in the past and what we are facing now. This makes it easy to chat about our lives and progress if we are working on certain life changes".*

# Building Relationships and Networks Beyond the Church

## Within families

Respondents explained that WYS has helped to strengthen relationships within and between families in the church. One respondent provided the example of visiting some of her relatives and sharing her story with them. She encouraged them to share their stories in return and reported that this resulted in mutual respect and stronger family bonds.

## Within the wider community

The church has a long history of conducting arranged visits to the community through the family cell groups. Respondents reported that WYS has had a positive impact in these community visits. One leader mentioned that because of WYS, they stopped being judgmental about members of the community. He reported that WYS had substantially helped community visits because they had learned to listen without pre-conceptions about other people's lives.

Church leaders reported that they have also tried to engage community-based organisations (CBOs) on WYS. For example, one pastor reported that they visited a community shelter for street children in order to better understand the children's backgrounds, and patterns of behaviour, with a view to helping them. However, it was reported that engagement on WYS with CBOs *"has not gained momentum"*. The respondent indicated that the CBOs likely needed more training on WYS, as well as access to WYS materials in order to take this up. The respondent indicated that the church had very limited time to assist and that they needed to think through how to change this.

It was also reported that young people in the church started to reach out to young people receiving welfare from the church. For example, they talked to street children to find out what happened to them to end up where they were. They have learned to listen to the stories with no judgment.

A teacher who shared stories with some of his troubled learners then tried to understand the feelings and lives of the boys that miss school and stand on the local street corners. The teacher believes that as a result of his engagement with the boys through story-sharing, they have made more of an effort to attend school.

One member said that he shared WYS with two of his colleagues and that it yielded good results. The respondent commented as follows:

*"I shared it with two guys at work, explaining that we meet with different people on a daily basis and we do not know what they are dealing with. But since we can't know everyone's story, the best way to start is with the people you know, such as colleagues, family etc. I then told them my story. Then they started to share, and I understood why one of them was so strict and the fact that he does not easily forgive, because people always took advantage of him and that made him a difficult person who does not easily forgive and trust. I learned that one of them started working as a farmer from a young age and his skills are self-taught, which explained a lot about how he does his work".*

Another member said that she shared WYS with a fellow nurse who works in the abortion section in the hospital where they both work. Because of her Christian beliefs, she reported that she used to have prejudicial feelings towards nurses who worked in that section. She commented:

*"It was with a colleague, who was a fellow nurse and was working at the termination of pregnancy ward. I told her how much I hate the work she is doing, and I told her my personal story. I then found out that she hates it too and she is depressed because, as the bread winner at home, she cannot risk losing her job. She said she heard me preaching and praying in our morning assembly and thinks that she is happy I chose to share my story with her. We talked for more than an hour and ended up being late for our shift".*

A respondent explained that there is a programme in the community called 'adopt a pastor', where pastors visit each other to get know each other better and share ideas to improve their church services. The programme was implemented to help leaders from different churches to better engage with each other.

This programme includes pastors running services at community churches that are not their own. It was reported that while this is largely successful, there have been instances in which some church members have had reservations about hosting pastors that they do not know. One respondent indicated, that a white pastor from a surrounding community made some church members feel out of their comfort zones and "insecure".

## Challenges

Pastors feel that the WYS programme is good, but that more training is needed for better results. One pastor reported that he, and other pastors, would have preferred seven to eight meetings with Heartlines to go through different topics in the manual. This would enable them to learn to introduce it to the congregation in a way that will inspire them to share more with their communities.

They also lament lack of resources, as not all pastors have the 'Beyond the River' film and reported that it would be good if all church leaders and care pastors could have the handbooks and training as well. Respondents felt that the results of WYS did not reach as far as anticipated, with more still needed to improve cascading WYS.

Some reported that because WYS is viewed as a "once-off" programme, the initiative fades away over time. Another reported challenge is that WYS is viewed as a "pastor's programme". It was suggested that there is a need to ensure that others understand that they are free to adopt the programme themselves. A respondent indicated that these individuals would still need access to the film and other resources.



Some participants reported that they were not comfortable with the group methodology. They mentioned that they would like to engage on a “one on one” basis. Some people are natural introverts, so they do not find it easy to open up about their lives to other people. For example, one member said that her husband was opposing it, saying that people will judge them if they know about their personal stories.

Some are worried about sharing their personal stories because they are concerned about confidentiality. One commented and said it would be best to set ground rules about confidentiality before sharing.

## What Happened to Get There?

### Description of what took place

WYS was introduced to this church on the 25th October 2017. A pastor who acts as a WYS champion, as well as a Heartlines staff member, contacted Pastor P about taking part in the WYS programme. From that initial contact, arrangements were made with the Potchefstroom Church Leaders forum (PCL), and church leaders from several churches were brought together to receive training. As one leader explained:

*“Someone from Heartlines came and, in detail, explained to us the aim of their initiative. The Heartlines co-ordinator explained that the movie’s [Beyond the River] intention is sympathy, but it is written in a way that other values are being taught. Then we watched the movie and discussed what we learned. After the movie a pastor then explained how storytelling works”.*

The respondent then explained that they received the guidelines, and that one of the pastors from PCL donated R5000 so that all pastors in the forum could get a copy of the film.

The leaders then took WYS and introduced it in their respective churches and Pastor P also introduced it in his own church. Pastor P asked the Heartlines champion to introduce WYS and the topics in the guideline to his church. The following Sunday, after congregants had watched the movie, he used the topics for his sermon.



# Taking WYS Forward

As mentioned previously, Pastor P integrated WYS in the already established 'adopt a pastor' programme to make it more effective. He said, during his interview, that he had already visited more than six pastors.

On the 11th April 2018 WYS was cascaded to the church. At the initial session the movie was shown, which members reported had touched them. The following week members were organised in groups and WYS was implemented through telling stories within groups.

The church also used its numerous departments to take WYS forward. These are:

- Family-church department: groups formed on a geographic basis, with close neighbouring proximity. Members meet weekly for prayer and preaching. They rotate between different households for their meetings.
- Care pastors department: a group of pastors that lead family-church groups. Two pastors are assigned to each group to lead weekly meetings. In addition, they meet monthly with the pastor to provide feedback and plan for the following month.
- Welfare department: a group of care pastors and congregants who work with a variety of welfare organisations. Examples of these organisations are feeding schemes for street children who do not stay in shelters and shelters for the homeless. The departments also identify struggling families in the community and plans assistance for the them.

After members of these departments were introduced to WYS, they also took it further and introduced it to their families at home, friends, as well as colleagues at work.

## Sharing with church members

Firstly, WYS was shared through group sessions within the church. Leaders thought it would be easy for people to share their stories in a group in order to create a group-based friendship. However, it was reported that this did not seem to work well with some groups because some people were shy and reluctant to talk about their personal life within a group of people.

Some respondents reported that they enjoyed sharing stories with others on a one-on-one basis. Respondents reported that they felt more comfortable sharing in this way, and that it created mutual respect and trust between the two people sharing. One pastor reported that he approached a former pastor whose name had reportedly been tarnished. He said after a session with that former pastor, his relationship with the former pastor improved because he became less judgmental.

WYS has also been shared through the church's welfare centre, which is the charity department that assists people in the community who are unable to help themselves. When the caregivers go out to do charity work, they find opportunities to share WYS with beneficiaries of charity work.

Members of family-churches or cell groups visit each other particularly when a member may be experiencing difficulties.

## Sharing with family, friends and in the workplace

One member who is a teacher indicated that he shared a story with a troublesome learner in his class. The teacher reported that she once took him to the staffroom. What could have resulted in harsh discipline turned out to be well-received therapy. The teacher shared his childhood story with the learner and the learner was also motivated to share his story.

After that session, the teacher understood the background of the ill-disciplined learner, which changed his view about the learner, and the learner also understood the teacher better. This resulted in positive changes in the learner's behaviour.

While many members shared with the families and other members of the community, others, as mentioned above, seemed to have enjoyed sharing with their colleagues, with positive results.

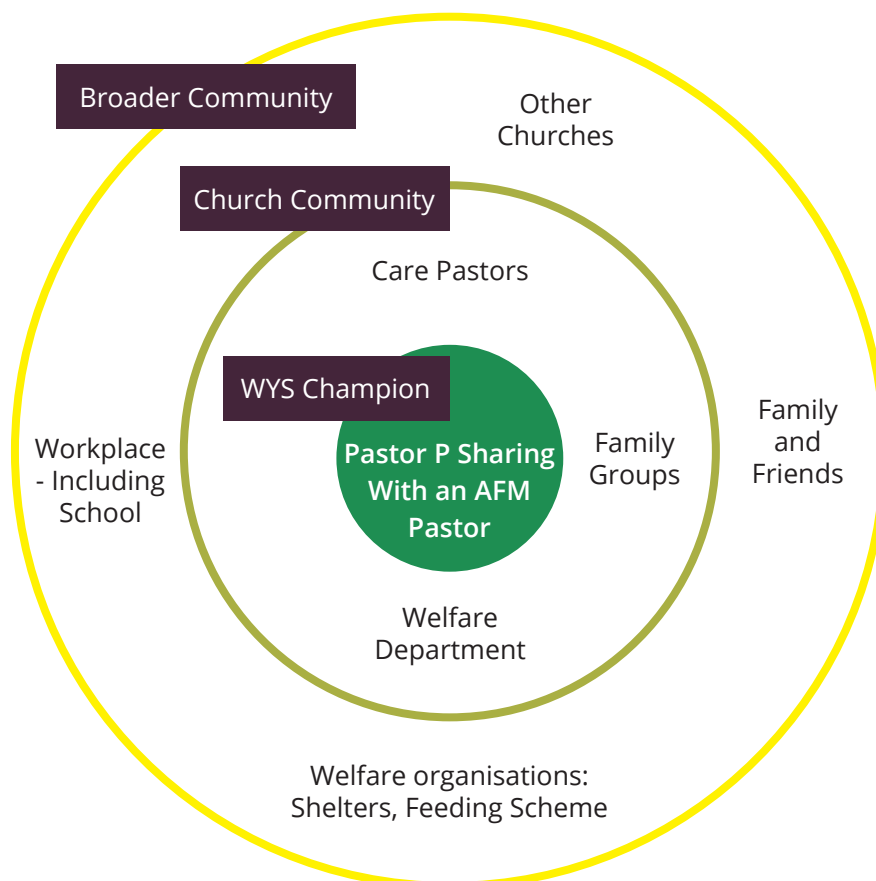
One member said that a colleague always begged for food, and that a few days after payday she would be without money. Others at work used to gossip about her. The church member approached this colleague about this problem because she (member) could not understand why her colleague was like that. They shared their stories and she learned that her colleague was caring for her two sets of twins (four children) of her own, as well as other family members, and that her salary was too small to cover everything. Her first set of twins were born of a father who denied that they were his, and the second set was from a different father who also deserted her with the children. She was alone in raising her children and caring for her entire family.

This member reported that she immediately stopped judging her colleague and she encouraged other workers to also take time to engage her, which they did. It was reported that they were all ashamed of their treatment of her, and they started to help her whenever necessary.

### Using resources

Formal WYS resources (including the film and guidelines) were used within the church. However, beyond this WYS was shared informally, so no resources were used. However, many respondents commented that they would have appreciated access to the resources to take WYS forward in their personal capacity.

The spread and ripple effect of WYS is depicted in the following diagram:



# Impeding or Promoting Factors

This section explores factors that may have contributed to WYS success or lack of success.

## Building momentum from a single story

The WYS story in the AFM church started when Pastor P approached the former pastor and launched WYS through the exchange of stories between them. This included a description of the methodology. The pastor experienced a change of heart and he realised that WYS could work for the benefit of the whole congregation.

WYS was next introduced to care pastors and the church cell groups, thus forming a solid basis for the spread of the methodology into other areas of church work in the community.

## Institutionalising WYS

This case study provides a good example of how WYS can be institutionalised in church structures. In this instance, the family cell groups form the cornerstone of WYS, but it is also applied in the community/welfare church programmes, as well as the programmes that seek to build relationships across churches (e.g. visiting pastors).

## Creating a caring environment

The findings of this case study suggest that WYS has built empathy amongst those who have engaged in story-sharing. This, in turn, has resulted in less judgment and more caring within the church, between members, within members' families and, finally, with community members.

Even those who did not initially feel at ease sharing their personal stories, indicated that they received more care and empathy from fellow believers.



## Conclusion

This case study illustrates how WYS, when taken on by a pastor - who has come to believe in the power of personal story-sharing - can lead to positive changes in empathy from the church leadership, to the parishioners at large, to smaller groups within the church and even to families. Those whom he shared with went on to share at organisations and workplaces beyond the church. It also has shown that the power of storytelling and sharing, even with no resources, can influence positive change.

The case study also demonstrates the impact of WYS on individuals, on the interface between two people, between groups of people, and across an entire congregation. This, in turn, builds understanding and respect, and leads to greater levels of open-mindedness, perspective-taking and being non-judgmental.

Whilst the case study notes that not everyone enjoys or benefits directly from sharing personal stories, the vast majority of participants not only changed as a result of the experience, but come to promote it in new contexts beyond the church. This has been shown in family contexts, amongst friends as well as different workplaces, such as schools. This provides evidence of the flexibility, adaptability and easiness of adopting the approach.

## Epilogue

*"I shared with my church sister, who opened up to me. We never had a good relationship and I never understood why. So, after church that same day I visited her and talked to her about how I feel, and I tried to share my story with her. Then we both shared stories and cried on each other's shoulders. We spoke about everything including our hopes and dreams".*

A story shared by a member of church sitting next to her former enemy, they looked at each other and laughed.

## Contact us

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