

HEARTLINES

The Centre for Values Promotion

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

Bedford Chapel - Case Study
18 February 2020



Prologue

Nosi has been going to Bedford Chapel, situated in the heart of Bedfordview, Johannesburg, for many years. The church caters to people from the surrounding suburbs and despite its location in an affluent area, the church is modest. It is known to be welcoming and draws in people from all walks of life: young to old, people of different races, domestic workers to senior executives, and people from different countries.

Despite the welcoming nature of the church, many of the congregants, such as Nosi, do not have relationships with others in the church. Outside of the immediate church networks, the majority do not know the names of others who attend services with them and tend to be "*cliquey*".

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:

- Three church leaders
- Eleven members of the church who have been involved in WYS in various ways
- The vice-principal of a school and four teachers

Changes Resulting from WYS

During this case study, we explored whether WYS had contributed to changes amongst members of the church congregation, the church leadership and even more broadly (for example, one church leader took WYS into her school and she shared WYS with the teachers). We also explored the reasons for any changes.

Church leaders and members of the congregation all indicated that WYS has changed the way they interact with others and how they see others.

Personal change

Members interviewed all felt that they had more empathy and were less judgmental, more respectful of and more curious about others. Respondents commented that this change was brought about because they now know each other on a different level as a result of WYS.

Some comments from the congregants included:

"I was also judgmental until now. I thought white people did not face the same struggles as us, especially around abuse and violence."

"I realised that we all have been going through a lot. We display this persona that we all think we are fine. I have learned not to judge a book by its cover. Some people have been through worse things than I have, so I did not feel like I am a victim".

A further member commented that the WYS process *"sparked empathy and allowed us to be without judgment"*. Yet another pointed out that she is now doing a life coaching course as she was inspired by her journey of having shared her story with the community. She added:

"after I shared my story, people came to me personally and started talking to me and also opening up to me about their lives. We started praying together and I got a lot of healing as I was holding a lot of anger in me for years and this was the first time I talked about my issues. Even my mother did not know I was still angry until this time."

Church leaders also talked of personal change. One commented that their role requires them to be open, non-judgemental and *"there for people."* The respondent highlighted the value of WYS, stating that it had allowed him to deepen these values. Other comments from church leaders included:

"It got me to know people on a level I did not know before".

"We learnt that you have no idea what is going on in someone else's life and, therefore, you cannot judge them".

Some respondents indicated that through the enriching process of sharing stories they have also developed the social skills of being gentle, holding back and not trying to push people to tell their stories when there is some reluctance.

Reluctance to share their story had a negative impact on the group dynamic. Teachers who participated in WYS indicated that WYS had shifted their thinking and relations but for those who did not share deeply, it was difficult to form a closer bond. One teacher explained:

"Some people shared a lot and others did not, so it made it difficult to form a closer bond if some were not sharing and taking it as seriously as others."

Another stated:

"I am more understanding of people and have a better understanding of where people come from and because of this we understand each other's strengths and weaknesses, so can assist each other and step in where necessary."

Another teacher indicated that the process made *"us more respectful of each other and more curious as to what our stories are. There has been a shift in how staff interact."*

Connecting with others in the church

Church leaders commented that WYS had enriched existing relationships and encouraged members and leaders within the church to form new relationships.

One member observed that relationships in the church had changed as follows:

"I observed that people were talking to each other more...people from different backgrounds. People showed more genuine interest in others. I feel people care about each other now and have better relationships."

Other members made observations about talking with or engaging with others in the church more as follows:

"People talk to each other who had never spoken before, especially those who were in same groups together during WYS. I had been in this church for 34 years and X has been here 7 years and I did not know her name before WYS. We got to understand and learn about people. Now every Sunday I see X and give her a hug."

One respondent spoke about deepening levels of respect:

"I sense it here that there is respect for each other's lives now"

Church leaders also commented on changes within the church congregation. One church leader indicated that as a result of WYS, she and her husband have become friendly with some people in the church and they have invited them to their home. Before they did not really know them, but now they see how much they have in common. Similarly, another member indicated that the women's discipleship groups in the church merged. Through WYS:

"we realised how much we had in common but did not realise it before".

Another church leader confirmed that she was now more open to meeting other people:

"I used to stick with the people I knew in the church. You know, one has barriers and you don't always know why, and no-one crosses them, but now I am making people more free to cross them".

These connections were well illustrated by one church leader, who spoke of the importance of *"seeing the connections with other people and [as a result] the sense of community has grown in leaps and bounds and people who would never have spoken to each other talk to each other, as they have a reference point now".*

To illustrate this, he told of the following story:

"A domestic worker and semi-retired marketing director were in the same group for WYS. During the sharing of stories, he spoke about his dysfunctional background and how important Christmas has become to him because of his childhood. The domestic worker who came from Zimbabwe grew up very poor. She indicated that she now works for a family in South Africa and did not have money to go home for Christmas. The retired guy came privately to me and asked if there was a way to pay her ticket without her knowing who had given it, as her story had touched him in view of his connection to Christmas and what it has come to represent for him in view of his childhood"

Leadership also highlighted that they had bonded with each other as part of the WYS process. Commenting on the initial introduction of WYS in their leadership training programme, one pastor stated:

"It was very powerful getting to know people on a deeper level, and the process makes you vulnerable, as you are sharing, but also going back and rethinking about what has affected me and moulded me in my life. It was a worthwhile experience".

Building Relationships and Networks Beyond the Church

One church leader commented that because of the work they do, some of these skills and values were already integrated into their work. However, he observed that WYS has added a new dimension on how to engage with others. Some members felt that it had changed relationships with their families and friends. Teachers who had been part of the WYS training all felt that it had deepened their working relationships and build greater trust between them. *"...there is now a certain level of trust, and that is what makes the team work, and now we trust each other."*

Within families

One church member indicated that WYS, *"has helped me to have more understanding of my family and how we all work."* Two others indicated that WYS had assisted them in being able to share with their families and, as a result, had begun to bridge the existing generation gap. These changes are illustrated in the following example:

"I had a session with my mother immediately after the church session. We both cried. We are from a culture that does not discuss feelings. This was the first time I heard from my mother about her upbringing. I found out things I would never have known and, since then, we have become closer and open and focused on reconnecting as mother and child, although I am now in my forties. I did not realise I longed for that relationship until now. I am also focusing on having a better relationship with my children and being a better parent."

This view resonated significantly amongst a number of members who felt that they had grown in up families where their parents did not share. One member commented that WYS helps to break down the mould from generation to generation:

"We did not speak and open up with our parents and as parents. We need to share. If you drop little crumbs of our story, it builds relationships between generations and helps to break generational gaps".

A teacher stated:

"Once I had got my head around what I had shared with everyone, I needed to process what I had shared as I had shared unwanted memories and once I had processed that, I shared with my family. Once I shared with my family, it helped them understand some of my behaviour. It made my kids feel closer to me."

Within the wider community

A church leader indicated that WYS has helped her to begin or facilitate a conversation with the cashier or other staff in shops: *"I feel I acknowledge people more."* This pastor reported:

"Some [parishioners exposed to WYS] are more open, and are becoming more open with others, and some people have expanded their comfort zone, but it's all a process."

One member unsuccessfully took WYS to her workplace. She attributed this failure to an unwillingness to share:

"I think they did not feel safe or it's the perception that the workplace is for working and being professional and productive, that there is no place to get personal. Then there is the fear of how will people see you if you are vulnerable."

Another member had a different experience when she took WYS to the school where she works. All the staff at her school went through WYS. The respondent commented as follows:

"We realised that we all come from different environments but yet we expect the same things from each other. We expect our kids to buy certain things and/or do homework, but we have wide range of economic situations and do not factor it in, and children do not give each other the same leeway as they don't know people's situations."

Yet a third member has continued to share her story with people from outside the church:

"I take walks in the mornings and I make sure to greet someone on the way and start a conversation and ask them about themselves and in the process share my story with them. In this process I have made more friends than I have ever made in my life..... I have had a WYS session with my boss, and found that she has the same medical condition like me - and I had no idea."



Changes in the church itself

Leaders and church members all commented that the church was more welcoming, friendly and open. They observed that this had led to new enrolment and indicated that, as a result, the church was becoming even more diverse.

Church members commented:

"People are more tolerant, and I have noticed that there is more openness. I feel that the church is becoming more diverse, as people are made to feel more welcome and people from all backgrounds are feeling comfortable to come."

"I have become a full member of the church ever since. I found a family. I was impressed as I had never seen such a thing been done in church. This exercise made me feel like I belong in a new family".

"The barriers between groups have been broken down quite a bit and people are more open to chatting to different groups of people."

"The church is warmer, and, in terms of trust, people feel safer to share within the context of the church than elsewhere. As people become vulnerable during the sharing of stories, they have learnt to trust each other as people are made aware not to gossip".

Finally, one member who had shared her life and spoke about her absent father stated that after sharing *"a white guy who came up and hugged me and said I will be your father and you can talk to me anytime. We had no relationship before."*

Challenges

Overall, church members believe that the process cultivated sensitivity by accommodating the differences between people and allowing them to see areas of commonality. However, the process is not without its challenges.

One member expressed the view that sometimes she did not really want to hear others' stories – especially those who are poor and come from lower socio-economic groups – because then she would feel responsible for helping members out financially. She believed that by people sharing their stories, she would feel obliged to help. This led to an interesting discussion about the objective of WYS. In response, most of the members in the focus group felt that that was not the aim of WYS and, as one member pointed out:

"Sometimes people just want a smile, a hug, and a pat on the shoulder...to know their name and for you to want to listen to them. It makes such a difference calling someone by their name."

Another member added:

"WYS is sharing your story to get to know someone better. It's not about opening your pocket. At the end of it, it is about what I have done to make people happier."

One person commented that it was hard to promote this change in her family as her family did not like to share. She commented that *"in our family, we prefer to keep to ourselves."*

As mentioned above, one member indicated that while she tried to share WYS at her workplace, it was not perceived as a safe space. There was a perception that sharing personal stories was unprofessional and not productive. This was echoed by another member who observed that she would like to share stories in some spaces but indicated that in other spaces they do not yet feel safe to share stories.

Although there were some barriers most respondents highlighted the positive changes that have taken place. This demonstrates that personal change has resulted in strengthening existing relationships and building new ones within and beyond the church. Church leaders were generally enthusiastic about the changes that have taken place, viewing the WYS process as:

"incredibly powerful"

"Whilst I knew people, this was such a gift to have time to listen to people's stories- instead of knowing bits and pieces of people's lives".

The ultimate objective of embarking on WYS was to begin to connect people and build a community. The church leadership and members believe this has been achieved but recognised that it is a process and needs to be continually worked on.

What Happened to Get There?

Description of what took place

This section provides a description of when and how respondents were introduced to WYS, how it was taken forward, where and in what ways. The church was introduced to Heartlines and WYS during 2017. This came about as the pastor had a long and close relationship with a Heartlines team member who had come to preach at the church over the years.

As part of the introduction, Heartlines gave the pastor the workbook, video clips and the 'Beyond the River' movie. Despite no formal training by Heartlines, the pastor decided to adopt the methodology and approach (as it fitted in with his own philosophy) and introduced it to 18 church leaders from Bedford Chapel who attended a leadership retreat early in 2017. As one leader pointed out:

"Heartlines did not train us. We did it ourselves. That is [the pastor's] style."

During the leadership weekend, the pastor introduced the concept of WYS and went straight into the sharing of stories. Each leader was given about 20 minutes to share their story.

Following the leadership weekend, it was agreed that WYS should be taken to members of the church. Leaders showed 'Beyond the River' and, thereafter, two sessions were held with members. The first session took place in September 2017. During the first session, the church leadership adopted a more formal approach, showing video clips and using some of the themes in weekly meetings with congregants. The process was held over four evenings with five groups of eight people. Church leaders facilitated each group. In each of these sessions, two people shared their stories per night so that by the end of the process all participants had shared their stories. The facilitators tried to use the questions suggested in the materials to help people tell their stories. As part of the process, the pastor shared his story with everyone who participated.

The leaders indicated that *"we wanted to use WYS to get to know each other better and support each other better. I was hoping to also address our religious differences"*. Bedford Chapel is a non-denominational church with people coming from different religious backgrounds with different views. The pastor indicated that he deliberately mixed the groups to ensure that they were as diverse as possible with the objective of getting people to start understanding each other.

The church ran WYS again in 2019. More than 30 people who participated in the first round wanted to do it again because they had been so motivated by the pastor. As some church leaders pointed out:

"S [the pastor] put a lot of energy into making this happen...there is so much scope to run this process in various groups."

Over 60 people participated in the second round of WYS. The second round was run slightly differently to the first, in that the leadership felt that it was too much to use the themes and the questions in the groups. This shortened the sessions. The pastor explained:

"The real impact was the connections between us, and the ongoing impact was the stories and not the questions. We stripped it down to its bare bones. The workbook was too big, and the session would be too long by doing the questions and sermons. We believed it would be easier to attract people for one and a half hours per week and, that way, more people were prepared to commit. If people had to commit to two and a half hours, not as many would have come."

Since holding the two sessions, some of the leaders have taken WYS into groupings within the church, like the women's discipleship group, the youth group (composed of school children) and a men's group.

When leaders and church members were first introduced to WYS, some were "cautious". Others felt "daunted" by having to tell their story to people they did not know. "Excited", "scared", and "cynical" were other first impressions.

The following include some broader responses to the WYS approach:

"I was nervous, as some people stories were amazing and mine was ordinary."

"I had a sense of vulnerability as was not close to everyone."

"The process was not new to me as I have been dealing with issues in my life for the last 10 to 12 years."

"I was excited. I came from the gay Christian community into this church and to be able to share takes the weight off my shoulders."

Despite initial cynicism, the overwhelming majority of respondents, including church leaders and congregants, argued that the process was both useful for themselves as individuals and the church. Comments from members included:

"I thought it was great as it gave people the opportunity to think about their lives and what was important and what they wanted to share or not. At the end of our process, there was real togetherness and people seeing each other and how we all connect and how similar we are."

"I could see the value in this process – the format was reassuring, and it brought humanity and valuing of people. We shared joys and challenges and shared genuine relationships."





Taking WYS Forward

Church leaders explained that following the introduction of WYS at their leadership conference, they shared WYS with church members in two sessions and thereafter, people began to share amongst family, friends, friendship groups and workplaces. The church was motivated to share WYS once the leaders saw the powerful impact it had during the leadership weekend. They wanted to shift relationships with congregants as *"we are all cliquey"*. The pastor observed that during the first week of the first session *"people were a bit nervous and, by the second time, people were connecting and by the last session people were connecting and we could not get them out of here"*.

The church has officially done WYS twice with its membership and is not averse to doing it again. The pastor indicated:

"We would be open to doing it again if momentum builds around it. We are not going to push for the sake of it but if there are enough people who want us to do it again, we will."

Sharing with youth

One of the church leaders implemented WYS over the last year amongst the youth. She explained her motivation:

"What I saw as the benefit from my own experience. I wanted WYS to break down the walls between us, and so much of what we hear is divisive. So for me, it's a nice tool to break the walls that we keep putting up because of our differences."

She reported:

"We did two kids per week during the youth meetings and had about 19 kids who shared. It was positive and some shared more than others. What I enjoyed about it is that they know each other, and it was interesting to see what friends shared and they were very respectful about each other's stories. They respected each other's boundaries and confidentiality. They are a lot closer as a group and were close before as we grew up in church, but the relationships have become more meaningful".

She also took WYS into her school where she is a social worker. There is a youth mentorship programme in her school, and she conducted WYS with the mentors.

Sharing in the workplace

Two church elders, a school principle and deputy principle, who had been on the leadership weekend, took WYS to their school and rolled out WYS amongst staff. The deputy principle indicated that *"we felt one way of getting to know each other as staff and the opportunity to share on a deeper level was through WYS."*

She explained the process:

"We told our story to all the staff and then we broke up into smaller groups. We did this process per grade."

She added:

"I hope that by us sharing, it has made us more accessible and human and that we go through the same things as others. We wanted staff to see us being vulnerable and that we are dealing with the same issues. At the time, it helped with unity and understanding of each other within each of the grades".

Initial interviews with school staff indicate that the WYS process has been incredible in terms of the positive impact on their own lives and in how teachers are now interacting with each other. As one respondent pointed out:

"We are now working together more as a team. In addition, because we know each other better. We understand why people are doing what they are doing."

She also started showing the movie – 'Beyond the River' - to a grade 7 class. They are also using materials from Heartlines to facilitate a discussion on racism in the school. It emerged that many of the students felt a cultural divide between them.

Sharing with family, friends and others

Other church members indicated that they shared with family members, friends with one shared WYS with her social women's group who were reportedly very excited about WYS. She indicated:

"They wanted to hear more...I told them about my experience with WYS and what I gained. I told my story and they shared their stories. The impact was great. A lot found it healing and there are things we did not know about each other even though we have been friends for years. We understood each other better, we became closer."

She also shared WYS with her extended family:

"I shared with them and spoke about how it impacted on me in terms of healing. The fact that I mentioned the healing aspect, they wanted to know more and so shared".

Others also shared in their workplaces and elsewhere, whilst some felt that they had shared in the church and *"that was enough"*.

One member indicated she had shared in her workplace, with her mother and with Grade 4 Sunday School children. This led to other stories.

"I found a child who felt they were not the favourite child amongst their siblings. I found a child that said he had been abandoned by his mother. I was shocked, as these children looked happy, but I learnt that day to never assume anything until I know the real person and their story."

She added that she still wants to engage more with WYS and *"get to know people better and also form valuable relationships with people in the church and outside the church."*

Another member stated:

"I have shared my story on my Facebook page and invited my Facebook friends to do the same, and the response was great. I ended up hearing from a guy who works in Correctional Services and he told me about prisoners that have not had visitors for years. I decided to visit them and hear their stories. While in the waiting room, I spoke to the person next to me and shared my story with them and respectfully asked them to do the same. I also had a session with the Sunday School class that I teach. I used the scripture from the Bible and asked the children if they wanted to share with me where they come from. I started this in 2019 after the realisation that people are going through a lot of things and have no one to talk to".





Using resources

In most instances, where WYS was shared informally, no resources were used and, instead, church members explained the process of story-sharing. Even in the case of the story above, the respondent indicated that she did not have access to resources, although she would like to explore them given the opportunity.

In other cases, resources were used. For example, in one school the deputy principle indicated that she had used one of the advertisements which Heartlines had provided in order to stimulate discussion around racism. She also showed the Heartlines movie to the learners in one of the grades. She indicated that she would like to show the movie to the whole school.

One church leader used WYS for the youth group in the church. She explained that she used the format that had been adopted by the pastor and

“worked out how best it would work with each group of kids. It was more informally done, but sometimes we used the mind map or answered questions directly for building their stories”.

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.

Leading by example

In the case of Bedford Chapel, leadership and members have embraced WYS. This is largely attributed to the pastor leading by example. Numerous interviews pointed out how powerful it was that he shared his story with the whole congregation, and he set the tone for how WYS would unfold. He made himself vulnerable in front of his congregation without hiding any flaws. One member stated:

"I think the way the process was introduced was critical. It had substance and if it's a superficial announcement no-one will trust it."

The pastor observed that *"unless you bring energy and enthusiasm, it will not happen."* and commented further:

"By me telling my story to everyone, it made me vulnerable to them and vice versa. There was real honesty in the process and then the leaders went into the groups and set the ethos, which was very honest and vulnerable and not hiding their flaws."

Being responsive to context

A second element which ensured the success of WYS at Bedford Chapel is that the leadership adapted aspects of the programme/tools to suit their needs. To illustrate this, one leader highlighted that her sister had done WYS in her church in Port Elizabeth, and they had gone through the more formal training and *"it did not have the same impact"*.

Creating a caring environment

One member observed that it had been possible to be open and both listen and share because of the respectful environment that had been created:

"During the session people respected each other's stories in a sense that they were not probing or asking questions."

More importantly, WYS gave people the space to be heard *"to tell their stories where no-one has been interested in hearing their stories before."*

Building momentum from a single story

One member reported:

"The process of telling our own story loosens us up to receiving other's stories and, that said, it is an opening because you cannot box WYS into one single programme. It is the start of a process and we have lots to learn about ourselves and others. We need to be sensitive to stories without prying and wanting to take over other people's lives."

One pastor commented:

"we started small to see the impact. [Once] they trusted me and the momentum began to build".

Another member pointed out:

"WYS has had a positive impact on me and the church generally. What is useful is that it offers a space for people to be safe and not fear being judged. It offers a space for people to have someone to talk to and not impose their opinions".

The only thing she suggested is that the introduction (in the way the Chapel implemented WYS) should be slightly longer as *"people cannot always jump into sharing their stories immediately"*.

As a final point, language was raised as a potential barrier to sharing. As one member pointed out:

"Some people cannot express themselves well in English and may shy away from participating. For example, a Congolese lady approached me and said she wanted to share her story but was afraid that no one would understand her, and she would not be able to express herself well enough".

Leadership commitment and the need for a champion

There are initiatives underway to take WYS to other churches in the area. The pastor of Bedford Chapel went along to one of these meetings with Heartlines. However, he indicated that he "could tell there was resistance from the other churches." The challenge, he argued, is that such a process is driven through enthusiasm and drive and that, as a church leader, "you have to believe in it and, in our case, we started small and we saw the impact and the church members trusted me after I told my story".

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how WYS, when taken on by a champion who has come to believe in the power of personal storytelling, can lead to positive changes. Empathy has been developed in the church leadership, the congregants, in smaller groups within the church, in families, organisations and workplaces beyond the church. This was completed with few or no resources beyond the commitment of time.

The case study also illustrates the impact of WYS on the personal 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, most participants not only change as a result of the experience but come to promote it in new contexts beyond the church. This builds evidence of the flexibility, adaptability and easiness of adopting the approach, as well as an indication of the possibilities for the programme inherently to scale significantly.

Epilogue

Nosi – who for years did not have any relationships with other Church members– is now very much part of the community. People who previously did not know her name now come to her to share their stories and talk to her and open up about their lives. They pray together and members notice and check in with her when she is not at church. As a result of WYS, there has been a lot of healing and it has given Nosi, and others, the space to talk about their challenges and blessings for the first time in their lives.

Contact us

Email us: info@heartlines.org.za

Call us: +27 (011) 771 2540

whatsyourstory.org.za

www.heartlines.org.za

