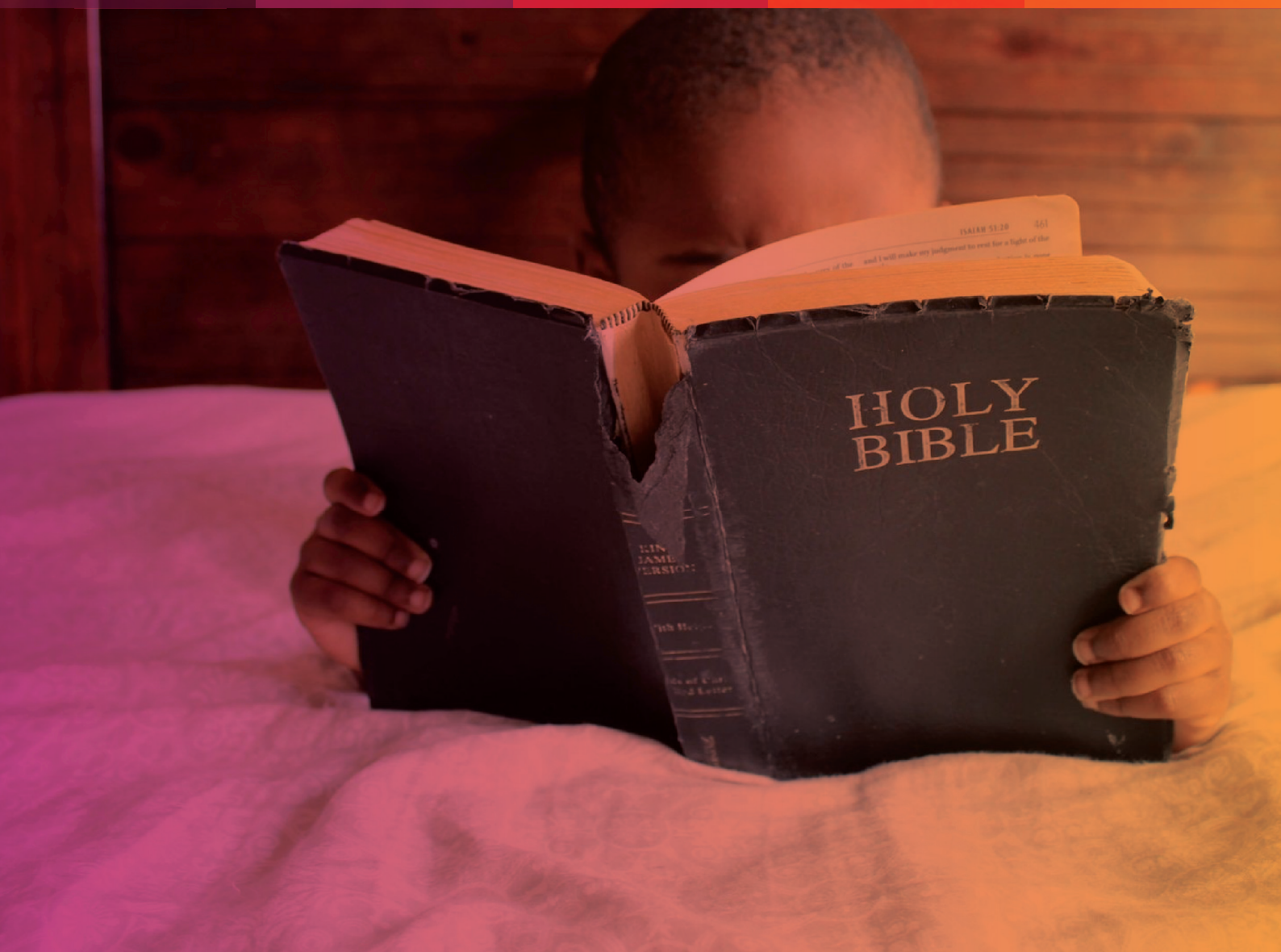


# HEARTLINES

The Centre for Values Promotion

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

Kanana - Case Study  
22 January 2020



# Prologue

The community of Kanana is fourteen kilometres from the goldmining town of Orkney in the North West Province. Kanana initially housed miners and their families working on the mines around Orkney and Klerksdorp, but mine closures in the area have changed the face of the community. Kanana is now characterised by high levels of unemployment, crime and gangsterism, and alcohol and drug abuse are rife. Stories of gang-related violence in Kanana regularly make the news headlines and, in 2019, pupils from Kanana and two close-by townships were secreted away to a safe venue in order to write their matric examinations, away from ongoing community crime and violence.

The Deeper Life Ministries church in Kanana sits on a plot of land in the township that does not yet receive services from the local municipality, including running water and electricity. The church has an agreement with a Kanana resident that, when needed, congregants and visitors can access water and ablutions at this private home. The church presently operates from a corrugated iron structure that services approximately 70 congregants from the local community. It is one of many small churches in the area.

Mam Gina, a member of Deeper Life Ministries, has a daughter who fell pregnant at the age of fifteen. Mam Gina's grandson is now seven years old. Mam Gina's daughter often vanishes for long periods of time, leaving the child with her mother. Mam Gina suspects that her daughter uses drugs, and never knows whether her daughter is safe or not until she finally comes home. Mam Gina says that Deeper Life Ministries is her lifeline. Her faith keeps her sane when she does not know where her daughter is, or even whether she is alive.

## 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 to evaluate WYS. This case study on the Deeper Life Ministries church in Kanana was developed as part of the evaluation and was based on face to face interviews, telephonic interviews and focus groups with the church leader, congregants at the church, as well as members of the Kanana community.

## Changes Resulting from WYS

During this process we explored whether and, if so, how WYS had contributed to changes amongst respondents. These are outlined below:

### Personal change

WYS has been used extensively as a tool at the Deeper Life Ministries by the church leader, Pastor LT. The research team asked Pastor LT and several congregants about personal changes that they had experienced as a result of WYS.

Pastor LT reported that WYS shifted a lot for her:

*"It made me appreciate my upbringing and life in general. When you hear other people's stories, you realise that you had it good. I was raised by my grandparents and there were a lot of us, and there was fighting over bread and struggling, but when I did WYS I realised that even though it was tough, I learnt valuable lessons from that and it built me into the person that I am today...you can be forgiving of other people in your life. You realise that they also have stories".*

Some of the congregants interviewed specifically mentioned how WYS has assisted them to no longer judge others. Comments included:

*"WYS has really changed me a lot. I am no longer judgmental of others. I respect people as they are. I try my best to understand why people behave the way they do and why they are the way they are. I know that there is a story behind every person's life." – congregant*

*"WYS helped me to become a better person. It is a good program that has taught me not to judge other people by just looking at them. I no longer judge people as I see them. I no longer judge people who smoke weed. Instead I try my best to speak to them, ask them questions to try to figure out and understand why they smoke weed. I got to know that some smoke to meditate, while others do it to relieve stress and try to forget some of their problems for a short while." – youth leader*

*"My son left home and we were not on speaking terms. After 'What's Your Story?' we reconnected. I called him. He came back home. We had a conversation about why he left. We have a better relationship now. I reserved all my opinions while we had the conversation and I remembered that we are being taught to judge less and listen." - congregant*

Other respondents discussed how the storytelling process supported greater levels of understanding that helped to resolve negative emotions and even improve relationships at work:

*"I don't get offended easily anymore. When I see the other caregivers at work being silent, I give them space and go back to what they shared in their story and try and understand that they are going through something and it has nothing to do with me. We got to understand each other better. We work together better. We speak openly and not keep quiet. We communicate better."*  
– respondent from community-based organisation

*"I wanted to help them understand me much better and I also wanted to understand them. I had anger problems at work. My colleagues were gossiping about me...It absolutely changed me so big. I am no longer angry with my colleagues. I live my life freely and I have learned to respect and treat other people with dignity. I am no longer judgmental of others. I don't take things personal anymore. I choose to be happy."* – congregant

Another respondent spoke to her increased ability to understand her children's perspective on issues:

*"I have gained emotional intelligence from this experience through communicating and connecting with my family and children. I don't shout prematurely anymore. I am trying to see things from my children's perspective, though this can still be a challenge."*  
– respondent from community-based organisation

### **Connecting with others in the church**

Pastor LT indicated that doing WYS in her church had *"helped [her] know the people [she] is leading better"*. She indicated that there were *"very touching stories. You realise people have been through so much"*. The pastor reported that WYS had bonded congregants and increased attendance at church.

Congregants agreed that they were connecting better with each other as a result of WYS. As one respondent commented:

*"We are no longer strangers attending the same church".*



Another respondent reported as follows:

*"Before WYS, those who knew each other would be in their small friendship groups, chatting and laughing and not really getting to know others, especially the newcomers. These days we have a different culture. We make it our mission to speak to the new believers and our visitors. Our aim is to make them feel welcomed, loved and appreciated".*

### **Changes in the church and organisation itself**

Pastor LT indicated that WYS had resulted in congregants being more committed to the church and attending more regularly because *"they [congregants] feel a sense of belonging"*.

A church master of ceremonies reported that WYS had resulted in her being more understanding about the circumstances of others and that this, in turn, led to *"improved attendance"*. She commented as follows:

*"I used to make crazy, hurtful remarks at times, especially to those who come late to church. After WYS I got to learn that there are so many people who walk long distances to get to church. I started to respect their commitment to God and to the church, because now I was aware of what they go through every Sunday and during the week services to get to church. Some of us who used to make these wrong remarks stay close to the church and we are driving, while others stay very far and walking to church".*

Another respondent also commented on improved attendance:

*"I notice a change of behaviour from many people in the church. Our cell groups have grown big because we have now developed a habit of talking to each other".*



Finally, one respondent reported that WYS had ultimately made the church more welcoming:

*"People talk more before and after church, just mingling. We make time for interaction. People are no longer coming and going without talking to others. Many people are open to talk about their backgrounds and make time to listen to others. We don't have intentional groups in the church to share their stories but people are continuing to share their stories in their personal spaces. It is much easier to interact with young new believers or visitors, and this makes it easy for people to join our church. People feel welcomed and valued and they look forward to coming back to church. People deliberately get out of their way to try to understand others."*

## Building Relationships and Networks Beyond the Church

### Within families and neighbours and strangers

Several respondents indicated that they had used the WYS method in their homes and with broader family members, and some reported that this had created improved bonds within the family.

Others indicated that they had engaged with their neighbours using WYS. It was reported that the Pastor had challenged them to use WYS with their neighbours. Respondents indicated that this had felt *"awkward"* for most who had engaged in the process. One respondent said her neighbour seemed *"shocked"* when she approached her to tell her story and so she chose not to push the person to respond with her own story. She indicated that in the end, the neighbour decided to share a little.

One respondent indicated that she had asked an Ethiopian foreign national owning a spaza shop in the area his story. She indicated that hearing his story had helped her to understand the some of the reasons why foreign nationals come to South Africa as refugees. She reported:

*"I was interested to hear where he comes from, how he came to SA, what was his name, because everyone calls him 'My Friend'. He was very appreciative. He said no one has asked what his name is. He was curious to understand why I wanted to know about him, and I explained that I have done this exercise and want to get to know more about people that I interact with. This is my new mission."*



### At the workplace

One respondent shared that she had issues with her colleagues and felt that she was being gossiped about all the time and decided to share her story with her colleagues. She reported that she now gets support and consideration from her colleagues, and that it has even impacted on productivity in the workplace:

*"I took that risk [to tell her story at work] and got more than I expected. I got support and consideration from my co-workers. It is super. And the funny thing is that they now worry about me, and I now have to be the one assuring them of how OK I am on a daily basis. That on its own is what makes me get better. It has improved our work production and makes it easy to work because you feel safer than before."*

### Within the wider community

Respondents spoke to the troubles in the Kanana community and indicated that WYS had helped them to gain perspective on why so many young people join gangs and are involved in substance abuse, robbery and other crimes. Respondents indicated that the church was trying to understand the reasons for this so that they could find ways to resolve some of the problems. As one respondent indicated:

*"There is a lot of gangsterism going on in our community and we try not to judge them but engage to try to understand why they do what they do. The church is trying to come alongside some of these guys to see what is it that we can do to help change our community. The aim is to win their trust. It is difficult because they don't want to engage."*

Another respondent commented:

*"The wider community is starting to recognise our church more. We are no longer judgmental and condemning those who don't go to church. We accept people as they are."*

## Challenges

Pastor LT indicated that a key challenge to WYS pertained to the sharing of stories sometimes resulting in buried emotions surfacing without being adequately dealt with afterwards. She indicated that it could be a problem if you *“dig that deep, and after that you just go...you scratch the surface and the person deep down is in trouble. People bottle up a lot of issues and may overreact when they share.”*

The pastor indicated that while referring people for psychosocial support in such cases was an obvious possibility, the reality was that *“our system is slow. The social workers do not attend quickly with cases. If only there could be other people trained in counselling around issues of trauma...”*.

While Pastor LT has spent considerable time and resources on successfully introducing WYS to others in her church and community, she indicated that getting pastors to work together – both within the community and in surrounding areas – is a challenge. She indicated that part of the issue pertains to pastors *“having so much on their plate”*, and part pertained to some being *“very fixed. They do what they have been trained to do. They don’t stretch themselves.”*

While many members of the church have adopted the WYS approach in their daily lives, a few indicated that they had not taken it much further forward. As one respondent commented:

*“After sharing and encouraging my neighbours to do the same I just stopped. I guess it became one of those good workshops that we attend and then file the notes and just continue with how life use to be. Trying to make a difference is difficult.”*

## **What Happened to Get There?**

### Description of what took place

The Deeper Life Ministries pastor reported that she first encountered Heartlines in 2002 after completing Bible School. At the time, Heartlines was running its ‘8 Weeks, 8 Values’ programme and, after being trained in implementing the programme, Pastor LT started using the resources in her church in Orkney. One of the DVDs that formed part of the ‘8 Weeks’ series got damaged, and so Pastor LT contacted Heartlines for another copy. She was told that a Heartlines employee was in Welkom (which is close to Orkney) that day and so she contacted him to ask for a copy of the DVD. The two met hurriedly at a local police station and exchanged contacts. From that brief encounter, Pastor LT grew to working more closely with Heartlines on programmes such as ‘Values and Money’.

In 2017, Pastor LT participated in a viewing and discussion of Heartline’s film ‘Beyond the River’, and then participated in a breakfast session where participants were introduced to WYS. Thereafter, Pastor LT was invited to a two-day WYS Bridge workshop, run by Heartlines, that was offered to pastors of different churches in the area. Pastor LT reported that part of the purpose of the WYS Bridge was to encourage pastors across different race groups and genders in the area to get to know each other better, and to promote closer working relationships.

Equipped with her training in and experiences of WYS, Pastor LT returned to her community in Kanana and started integrating WYS into her work.



# Taking WYS Forward

## Sharing with church members

Pastor LT explained that she introduced her congregants to WYS at Wednesday evening Bible study meetings. She also used the methodology at a Women's Day service, as well as on Youth Day on June 16th 2019.

In the case of the latter, the pastor invited some young graduates to her service, and each graduate told young people their stories of how they completed their education and the trials and tribulations that they faced doing so. After the service, the young graduates (who had brought cellular phones and laptops with them) sat with youth from the church and assisted them to get information on different courses and programmes and, where possible, assisted them to submit applications.

## Sharing with friends, family, neighbours and strangers

After being introduced to WYS, many congregants interviewed for this case study indicated that they had taken WYS forward by introducing it to family members and friends.

As indicated previously, the Pastor also suggested that congregants try and share their stories with neighbours. However, this was not always an easy process.

Others engaged with people in the community that they encountered more regularly, such as shop owners, and this resulted in positive experiences.

## Sharing with the wider community

Pastor LT is not only active in her church. She is employed by Heartlines to visit local schools and attends assemblies and other events there. She reported that she has done motivational talks at schools in which she has introduced the WYS method to encourage young people not to label and undermine others because *"you don't know what their story is"*. She has also conducted some WYS sessions with Grade 7s in preparation for high school.

LT completed WYS with educators in these schools. The pastor recounted one incident in which an educator opened up and told her colleagues how difficult she found it that they did not show support to her after her husband died, and the impact that this had had on her. She felt that she was being judged, because this was her second husband. These revelations resulted in *"people saying sorry and individuals hugging and embracing her and saying sorry"*.

Pastor LT has also taken several groups of Community Public Works participants through WYS. These took the form of either full-day or half-day workshops during which the participants were given the opportunity to listen to and tell stories. The pastor plans to return to these groups and to train them on ways in which WYS can be taken forward in their community work.

The pastor has a regular slot on a community radio station, and she reported that she has regularly spoken about WYS on her programme. On one occasion, a listener was a member of a community-based frail care centre and, when the centre decided to host an end-of-year debriefing session, they decided to ask Pastor LT to attend and introduce them to WYS. According to a respondent from the frail care centre this, in turn, led to WYS with the elderly people. These took place during home visits in order to get to know the person better and understand the circumstances that led to them not having people to help take care of them. The respondent indicated that the older people were *"more than happy to share and it seemed they wanted someone to talk to. We got to hear of the challenges and fears they face daily on a deeper level."*

Finally, the pastor reported that she also works with local prisoners. She is currently taking between 12 and 15 prisoners though Heartline's 'Values and Money' programme, which *"has a lot of WYS in it. As you are doing it, others will tell you how they ended up in prison and how they messed up their lives because of money."* The pastor plans to start WYS with the prisoners after this but reported that *"it is nice that the different programmes tie up so nicely. It is always about touching on values. One moves easily into the next."*

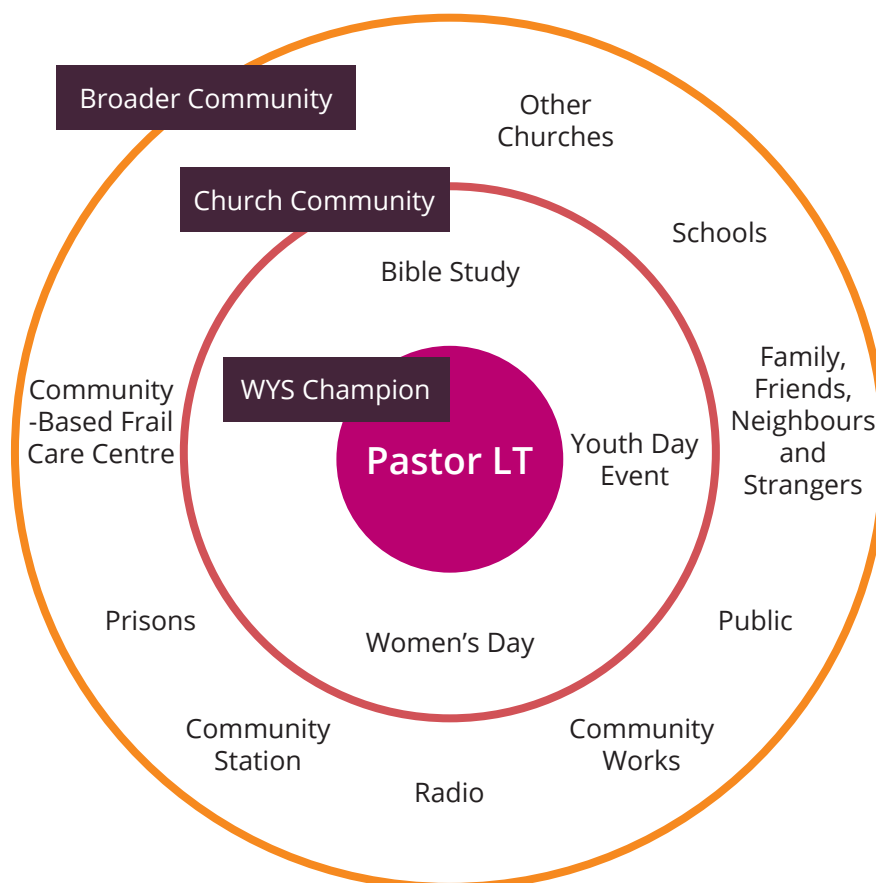
### Across churches

Pastor LT reported that some years back a 'Kanana Forges Us' campaign was launched. The campaign seeks to foster unity across churches and build bridges with members of the community. All the church leaders who are part of this campaign were at the WYS Bridge and it was reported that the Bridge process assisted in bringing the church leaders closer together. However, Pastor LT reported that it remains a challenge to get church leaders from different churches to work together, not least because of their work loads and concomitant restrictions on their time.

### Using resources

In most instances, where WYS was shared this was done *"informally"* without using the resources but instead they explained the process of sharing and encouraging 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.

## Enabling factors

### Having a champion

This case study clearly illustrates the successful impact made by an individual champion. Pastor LT has integrated WYS into all areas of her work, and very consciously encourages others to adopt the story-sharing approach. She has used WYS in her church, in school visits, in engagement with community workers, and even on her radio programme. This, in turn, has resulted in many others taking up WYS. The extent to which the receipt of a stipend from Heartlines is a core element of whether or not a champion takes up a cause would require further exploration, although the extent to which Pastor LT incorporated WYS into every aspect of her work, as well as her evident enthusiasm about the WYS programme, suggests that this is not a core factor for being a successful champion.

### Positive emotional experiences

The evidence suggests that most people have positive emotional experiences when engaging in story-sharing processes (see the next section for those who do not have positive emotional experiences). This leaves people feeling recognised, visible and affirmed, and is likely one of the factors that promotes the adoption of the story-sharing approach in an intentional manner. Witnessing others having a positive emotional experience (such as the elderly people in home visits by care workers) appears to further enhance the positive emotional experiences of WYS.

### Personality

One congregant indicated that *“not everybody is an activist or initiator, so personalities also play a role in who shares stories”*. The converse of this is that many do have personalities that appear to support successful story-sharing. Coupled with a positive emotional experience as a result of telling or listening to a story, personality may be an important factor in whether or not people intentionally adopt the story-sharing approach. More research would be required to understand what specific aspects of personality would be involved here.

### The power of the story and intentionality

At the centre of it all is how telling stories somehow makes us human. There is a whole body of literature that explores why storytelling is human nature, and WYS has tapped into that, but has included intentionality into the mix. In this way, sharing stories can be used with the expressed purpose of developing connections, breaking down boundaries and building connections.

## Hindering factors

Hindering factors include the reality that – as one congregant indicated – WYS is *“not for everyone”*. Although most respondents find the process to have a positive emotional effect, for some, this was not enough to take WYS forward.

Further, the task of attempting to complete WYS with a neighbour is an interesting example of WYS not working for those who attempted it. This could potentially be the case because neighbourly relationships can often be quite formal, as parties seek to protect the privacy of their home lives.

## Conclusion

This case study illustrates how WYS, when taken on by an active champion, can lead to positive changes across several sectors of society. Empathy has been developed in the congregants, in a Bible study group within the church, in families, in community-based organisations and workplaces beyond the church. This was often done in an informal way without the use of resources but incorporating the method of story-sharing as a way of starting difficult conversations.

The case study notes that not everyone enjoys or benefits directly from sharing personal stories. However, for many participants, story-sharing provided a way to learn more about others, connect and gain insight into their lives. WYS is an adaptable approach that has the possibility of extending understanding between diverse people on a broad scale. Through WYS, the congregation of Deeper Life Ministries has been more welcoming to new members and attracted a larger following.

## Epilogue

Mam Gina shared her story with others from her Bible study group at her church. She feels more connected to them and has been relieved that she has not been judged on her daughter's behaviour. She feels that she has gained a way to speak to her daughter and wants to use the WYS approach to find out more about what drives her behaviour. Although her grandson is still young, they are using stories to start difficult conversations about where his mother is and why she does not seem to want to be with him. Deep Life Ministries continues to provide much-needed support to Mam Gina.

## Contact us

Email us: [info@heartlines.org.za](mailto:info@heartlines.org.za)

Call us: +27 (011) 771 2540

[whatsyourstory.org.za](https://whatsyourstory.org.za)

[www.heartlines.org.za](https://www.heartlines.org.za)

