

HEARTLINES

The Centre for Values Promotion

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

Potchefstroom Reformed Church - Case Study
2 October 2019



Prologue

Potchefstroom Reformed Church, part of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, or Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK), is situated in the southern part of Potchesfstrom, in the North West Province. In view of its location and history, its members are exclusively drawn from the largely white Afrikaans community from the surrounding suburbs. On entering the church and church grounds one is struck that both the interior and exterior architecture is reminiscent of the old Apartheid era. This stereotype continues to linger and there are members who *“might need to be dragged”* into a space where the church is focused on building cross-cultural relationships and proactive outreach to the broader community in order to contribute to the revival of the town.

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:

- One NGK church leader
- Three pastors who are part of the Potchefstroom Church leaders’ forum (PCL)
- Five members from the church who have been actively involved in WYS.

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 into the local community. We also explored the reasons for any changes. Church leaders and members indicated that WYS made them think beyond themselves and reach out to others. As one member stated:

“give before someone is forced to ask for your help.”

Personal change

The church leader and members interviewed indicated that WYS *“changed me for the better”* and made them more aware of the need to think of others and to give. The Reverend pointed out that WYS as an approach is *“emotional and speaks to one on an emotional level and to share your heart to people that you work with is something.”* He added that WYS:

“reinforced my thinking that I was already on the right page but there were people who thought they were on the page, but they were not.”

While Reverend J feels that “I will sit at someone’s house irrespective of colour or race and I will share my story and he will share his and we will become friends”, the views emerging from church members pointed to the following:

“Yes, definitely WYS changed me for the better...I am more curious and less judgmental and try and be more understanding of others and where they come from, what their beliefs are”

“What I have learnt is that, when I look in the mirror, I only see myself, but WYS makes you think about others. I feel more curious and have more empathy as it makes you realise to put yourself in others’ shoes – WYS helps one to get some perspective and forces one to focus on the needs of others and to look beyond your own problems.”

One member however, indicated that it did not have an impact on him:

“WYS is not a separate thing to me and [I use it] as a matter of course – that is the way I do things...I have always been open to people so cannot say the extent to which it has changed me.”

Connecting with others in the church

Reverend J is of the view that those who have been exposed to WYS are feeling more connected and “there is more openness and people want to connect to each other”. To illustrate this, he indicated that now after services, “there is a large group who come together and drink coffee and laugh and tell stories.”

In terms of the views of church members, the following emerged:

“I cannot comment on the church as a whole, but it is a select group of people that attended WYS and amongst that group, are friendlier and you tend to become closer and there is a better understanding. We are a close group – after church we have tea and coffee and we share and talk...and this started after WYS.”

“I think people are more comfortable with each other, some of us have known each other for decades and there are things we did not know about each other...”



Building Relationships and Networks Beyond the Church

Reverend J indicated that WYS is a “life-style thing and we have incorporated WYS into the philosophy of the church.” To reinforce this view, several members indicated that the philosophy and approach of WYS “is already part of my life.” They indicated that WYS had provided a space to share with family members so that they could begin to think differently about their role within the broader community and “thinking of others”.

Within families

Reverend J and church members indicated that following WYS and the experiences they have had, they have not only shared with their families but have been able to get them to think differently about other people and the role they need to be playing in society – especially in a country like South Africa.

Reverend J recalled how he shared an experience he had when he went to visit a black pastor (as part of the ‘adopt a pastor’ campaign):

“When I came back from X’s house and described the house and how they live, she (my wife) was touched to her heart and that is a good sign, as through sharing of stories, people will become aware and learn to respect each other.”

One member engaged with his son about WYS:

“I think it had an impact on him and changed his way of seeing things and experiencing things.”

Within the wider community

A key focus of the work of this church is outreach to communities including networking and building relations with other churches and organisations.

Prior to the introduction of WYS, in 2017, Reverend J was the forerunner in establishing the Potchefstroom Church Leaders forum (PCL). The aim of the PCL is to foster cooperation and build unity between different church leaders across racial lines. The PCL consists of 45 church leaders representing churches in traditionally white areas and in township communities. The aim of the united forum is to encourage different communities – all cultures and denominations - to build unity amongst the churches irrespective of race. Reverend J stated that the PCL is aimed at ensuring that *“we work as a family of God together.”* A key issue highlighted by the Reverend emerged from a meeting of the PCL (which the evaluation team attended). This was regarding the role it sought to play in addressing socio-economic issues in the surrounding communities and to *“show Potchefstroom we want to move forward.”*

One church leader indicated that after the PCL had been exposed to WYS, its work and approach shifted:

“because Heartlines is about relationships, it is now an integral part of what we are doing.”

As a result, some of the campaigns that the PCL is involved with have a slightly different focus than before. For example, every Sunday there are now joint prayer groups between traditionally white and black churches who come together in different locations. The attendance of the joint prayer groups grows weekly. Another example, provided by a PLC member, was the introduction of the ‘adopt a pastor’ project. This aimed to build better relationships between pastors and involves each pastor getting a list of other pastors that they need to meet and visit in their homes (whether it be in the suburbs or townships). They share their stories with each other in order to understand where people come from and what they experience and deal with.

As Reverend J explained:

“What I am trying to do with the pastors is get them to visit each other...People don't want to go into the life of a person living in a tin shack – people don't want to move out of their comfort zones.”

However, he indicated that *“everyone that becomes involved - they change and soften in their hearts and start respecting each other.”*

Other initiatives embarked upon by the PCL includes a focus on addressing problems in schools (targeting poor functioning schools) and other socio-economic problems in the surrounding communities. The overall aim is to begin to mobilise other formations within the town to address these issues together. Reverend J points out that this initiative is not only about changing people but about changing value systems and vision. It starts with the children. He added that *“we started sharing despite differences and we have the same vision for the city, the common goal is love for the city.”*

Members of the church indicate that they believe that the relationship between their church and outside organisations is getting stronger. A pastor who became part of the PCL pointed out:

"I always thought white pastors want to be treated superior and I never really had any desire to know them. Then, I was invited into the forum and through that, I got a change of heart. I was treated the same as other white pastors and I was never given any negative vibes or discrimination. I was even paired with a white pastor to work on a project and that has given me a different perspective. Because while we worked together, we shared stories and got to know each other better. One pastor was also assigned to reach out at my church, he used one of 'What's your story?' topics to preach and it really made a difference with my congregation - because they still talk about it today. We are working on a plan to help my congregants watch the movie so that they can see how to implement his sermon in their lives."

He added that in terms of the 'adopt a pastor' campaign he was assigned to visit both white and black pastors and he is happy he has reached out to them equally. This made him proud because he saw that what he had against whites was because of what he heard, not what he knows or what happened.

In terms of the role of outreach work, church leaders and members are of the view that since WYS, outreach to the wider community is an increased focus and *"people are becoming more comfortable to reach out to others irrespective of race."*

Changes in the church itself

In terms of the changes that have taken place in the church, leaders and members stated that there has definitely been a change in the church. Attitudes and the way people engage with each other, especially amongst those who were exposed to WYS, have been more positive. In addition, aside from the way people in the church are interacting with each other, there has also been a shift in terms of how people are viewing their role externally.

Reverend J pointed out that *"now we have a relationship with each other and now we are becoming one family."* This view was reinforced by a member who stated:

"there has definitely been a change in the church, the attitudes and the way people engage with each other."

Another member added:

"I don't know what happens behind closed doors but there have been some changes, and some are respectful and open to others..."

One member however, believed between 10% to 15% of the congregation has changed and “we don’t have to drag them along.”

Reverend J believes that “the only way to get South Africa on the right track is to engage with the broader community and other churches.” He is of the view that “people are more empathetic” and want to reach out to others. He reported that people in his community (especially those exposed to WYS) are responding differently to campaigns and are more willing to become part of community projects. He added:

“I want to start in my community – 90 minutes, 100% of loving service.”

He explained that the plan is to take church members to assist in different initiatives.

Reverend J acknowledges that whilst people are becoming more comfortable to reach out to others irrespective of race, the difficult part is for individuals to go by themselves to visit people in townships.

“People will feel more comfortable going in groups...I don’t think a normal guy will have the courage to go on their own.”

Views from members include the following:

“The key element is to see to the needs of others. It is better to give, instead of waiting for others to ask. We need to see the need so that we can prevent others from having to ask.”

“I think the outreach to other communities is more since WYS...I think people are trying to bridge the gap between the white and black churches.”

“I think people in our church are more positive to go to people in squatter camps.”

Challenges

Both Church leaders and church members believe that the WYS process (together with the focus of the PCL work) has contributed towards the church having a more outward focus; caring about and contributing to others. The challenge is that only a portion of church members were exposed to WYS and it is clear from some members that, at this stage, it is the same faces that volunteer for outreach projects.



As one member pointed out:

"not all are quite exposed to this programme."

What Happened to Get There?

Description of what took place

This section provides a description of when and how respondents were introduced to WYS, and how it was taken forward.

During 2017, Heartlines was running a programme in Klerksdorp and the Heartlines representative heard about the work that the NGK Reverend was doing in Potchefstroom and made contact. Reverend J - inspired by the call by an evangelical pastor in March 2017 to get one million people to gather in Bloemfontein for a day of prayer for the country – decided to establish the PCL to build unity between black and white churches with the aim of helping the broader community. The Reverend stated that the Bloemfontein call inspired him:

"I must bring all the church leaders together in Potchefstroom to pray...at the time I thought I cannot even bring all white people together, so how can I bring different cultures together?"

He sent out WhatsApp messages to the churches around Potchefstroom and 45 church leaders got together and agreed to form a steering committee. Reverend J recalled that *"the church leaders came together despite cultural barriers..."* Emerging out of this process, a joint prayer meeting was held in September 2017 where 5 000 people across all races came together to pray for the city.

In the beginning of 2018, after Heartlines had approached the church, the movie, 'Beyond the River' was shown to a large group of church leaders within the PLC. The church leaders received training around WYS and *"we committed ourselves to use the movie and story-telling sessions in our congregations."*

Reverend J pointed out:

"(Heartlines) forced us to share – when you start telling your story and you become honest and tell your story - whether of hate or disappointments, happy and sad moments, you start growing into a relationship with the other person."

Several pastors who are part of the PCL process highlighted the following:

"I think sharing created a good and safe environment where we do not judge each other."

"After watching the movie, it bettered our relations as pastors and that encouraged us to take it to the congregations."

"We have seen how stories can touch and change lives, it has made it so easy to be in a different community with different cultural people."

"It helped deal with racial barriers, because even us, as pastors, are now more open with each other and we are different races."

At the Potchefstroom Reformed Church, WYS was rolled out to cell groups, resulting in about 300 (out of about 900) church members participating in the process. They shared their stories with people within their cell groups. Reverend J pointed out:

"WYS approach was very useful as it is a natural way of working with people. This method fit me like a glove as it is the way the church operates."

The church also showed the movie to church members in a big group and then smaller groups watched the movie.

Following this process, Reverend J:

"challenged my members to go to workplaces and share their life stories and I left it there...some took it to their workplaces...I did not ask for feedback as part of our culture of our church is reaching out to communities and cross-cultural work and that is our focus."

Members indicated that after watching the movie, they went into cell groups, talked about it and shared *“our stories in the cell groups”*. One member indicated that at the outset he was *“not sceptical”* about the process and another stated that he thought the reaction from members was mostly positive, even though they had not been exposed to a programme like this before. Regarding the process, members commented:

“I am very open minded and things which were showed in the movie, I was already in tune with that - in terms of different cultures and how to respect each other.”

“People fear that you are going to find out something that they want to hide, and they don't want to talk easily – I think people did eventually share.”

“I think the programme is necessary as it helps you to identify issues and how to make progress in life. Heartlines teaches you a lot of things – from how to socialise and interact with people.”

Taking WYS Forward

Church leaders explained that following the introduction of WYS, it was taken up in a variety of ways.

Sharing with other churches

Church leaders and members highlighted that WYS was shared in different ways – from church leaders (through the PCL) to their own communities and within the NGK itself. There are two examples which highlight how WYS was shared in two other churches in the Potchefstroom area. As Reverend J indicated, *“I did it the same as me...I challenged the church leaders and I supplied them with the tools.”¹*

Sharing in the workplace

Reverend J did not monitor how members have shared WYS. However, during interviews with members the following emerged:



One member who is an area manager for MTN started using WYS in his stores:

"I took WYS to my stores especially the new stores that I got after I did WYS. After I watched the movie – it gave me different ideas...I shared my story in the stores."

He indicated that he shared WYS in his stores as he wanted to improve teamwork and

"it has helped and now the staff understand each other better especially between different race groups....".

He added that he is continuing to tell his story and share with his staff.

"If I get new staff that is what I do...I try and understand where you come from, what's your culture and people are feeling comfortable."

Sharing with the wider community

Another member indicated that he lectures at the local jail and he took the principles of WYS to the jail. He indicated that I *"used the principles strongly."* He stated that in order to do Christian work

"It is no use reading the Bible and expecting people to engage and hear you, you need to make the person your friend first, then talk about the Bible."

He recalled how he had just done an *"amazing session"* in the jail that day and *"we spoke about our personal lives. And everyone was sharing their stories and it was brilliant."* He concluded that:

"I want people to understand that you cannot Bible punch from a distance, you have to become close to people."

He added that he had also shared the approach with family and friends.

Another member indicated that he was retired but did community work and as part of his community work he shared WYS. He added that he shared the process with his gym friend and with his son.

"I think it had an impact on him and changed his way of seeing things and experiencing things."

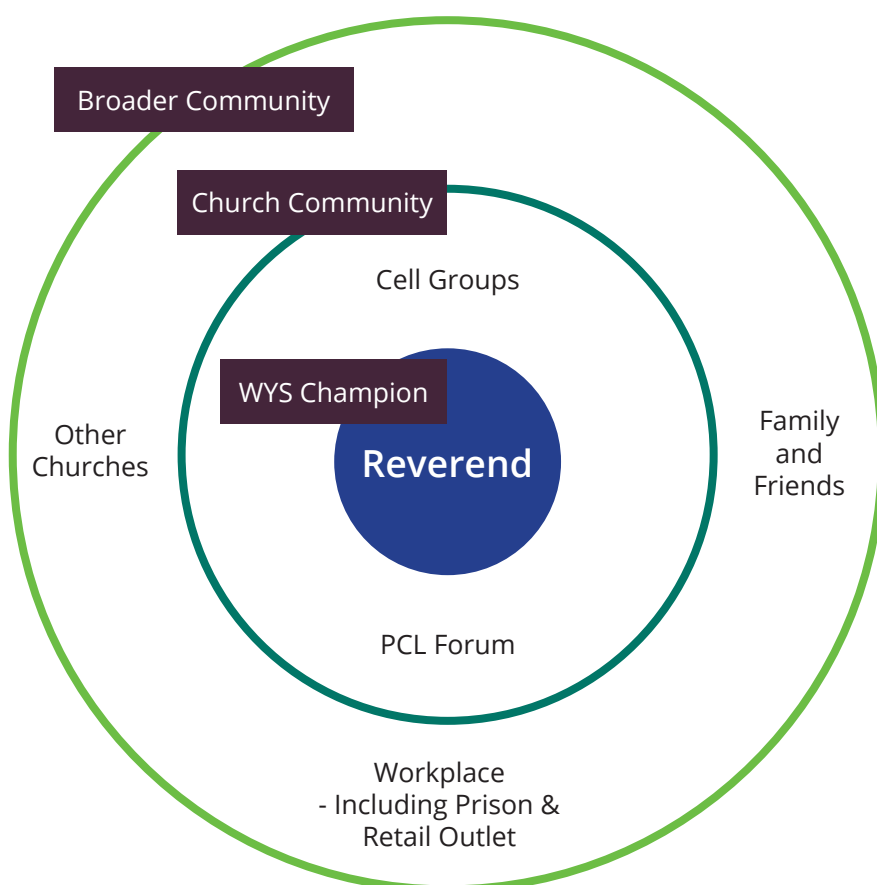


And finally, Reverend J has indicated, he has shared his story and WYS with his wife, various pastors in the broader Potchefstroom area, as well as some business leaders as part of his attempt to encourage them to support the PCL.

Using Resources

In all instances, WYS was shared informally and no resources were used. Members indicated that they shared the idea around the movie as well as the idea of story-telling and the sharing of 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.

Leadership driven

In the case of the NGK, the focus of the leadership was utilising WYS to get members to think beyond themselves and focus on the broader community. In addition, WYS was used as a technique to enable them to be comfortable *“working cross-culturally”*.

This was particularly important for Reverend J in leading the PCL. The Reverend saw Heartlines as *“cementing my vision of building relationships across cultural lines.”* However, he acknowledged that not all the community bought into it and a lot are uncomfortable. It has been a challenge for them to move out of their comfort zone. He added:

“It is not easy for people to come out of their racist culture – we are talking about opposite colours as well as living opposite politically.”

Understanding that, he is hopeful that people will start sharing their stories, starting in their homes with family and staff.

This will slowly shift to start trusting each other and beginning to work together. He believes that members are becoming more willing to share their stories with people that live and work in their homes – and *“we move from there.”*

Understanding the environment

The church leadership understand the context they are operating in and acknowledge that change will take time. Reverend J's opinion is that people are becoming more empathetic following WYS and

“more are willing to become part of community projects.”



Conclusion

This case study illustrates how WYS has contributed towards changes amongst church members with a noticeable impact on the broader community. There are signs that some members of the church have begun to shift in their thinking around how they see themselves and the need to focus beyond themselves, to contribute to the broader community. Several church members pointed out that people are becoming more comfortable to reach out to others, irrespective of race. However, the bigger shift has been around the work that the church has spearheaded with the PCL and what it seeks to achieve. The reality is that for the PCL to achieve its objectives, it needs members of all the churches to buy into its agenda.

This case study highlights that changing perceptions takes time and the Reverend understands this. He believes that shifts towards increased levels of empathy and understanding have begun and the power of sharing stories will lead to the building of trust so that people will begin to work together. This is clearly reflected in what has emerged around the PCL.

Despite the history of Potchefstroom, WYS and the movie have influenced some members on a personal level and in their interactions with others. In addition, the interviewees indicated that they had shared with family and friends as well as in some workplaces. These shared stories were met positively.

Epilogue

Today church leaders, from both black and white churches, meet together in the boardroom of the Potchefstroom Reformed Church – something which would never have been envisaged just a few years ago. As part of this, the church has become the driving force behind bridging the divide between black and white churches in the area. They share the common aim of addressing socio-economic problems plaguing all surrounding communities.

Whilst the church has taken on a broader community interaction, church members are more aware of their need to get involved on a personal level. Those who participated in WYS are more connected and engage on a deeper level with each other.

Ultimately, Reverend J – who is aware of a possible backlash from some church members – believes that this path is a good thing for the country and the Church – and it can work. *“It is a story of love – it is the central piece of the Bible.”*

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