

**HEARTLINES**

The Centre for Values Promotion

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

Northfield Methodist Church - Case Study  
4 September 2019



## Prologue

Tony (not his real name) is a leader in a Methodist Church whose community is somewhat of an anomaly. His congregation is largely white whilst the broader Methodist church is very racially diverse. Tony wanted to find a way to increase the diversity of the church. To this end, the church set up a monthly committee meeting to direct and monitor the process of promoting diversity. Tony realised though, that whilst this was leading to small shifts, further change was needed. He realised that this was a slow process that needed mechanisms to deepen the change. Tony, together with the other leaders in the Church, decided that transformation had to start within the church administration. Hence, the WYS intervention was implemented amongst church staff. Some of the staff have been resistant to change and the need to address diversity.

## 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 on the Northfield Methodist Church in Benoni was developed as part of the evaluation and was based on face to face, telephonic and focus groups with three church leaders and six staff members who work in the church.

## Changes Resulting from WYS

During this process we explored whether and if so, how WYS had contributed to changes amongst church staff, the church congregation and even more widely. Several changes were reported.

### Personal change

Church leaders and staff alike acknowledged that WYS impacted on them in different ways. One church leader that we interviewed stated that WYS has had a real impact.

*"I definitely think that WYS has had an impact on me. In terms of me as an individual, now I listen and also hear. Before, I listened but did not hear. I am also less judgmental, and I have been pushing that line on my Facebook about not being judgmental".*

A staff member observed that WYS has influenced her, making her more compassionate and curious, as well as less judgmental. She observed that:

*"you realise it is not judging a book by its cover. It's not about what's on the outside". The respondent continued to say that this change came about because "WYS gives you a deeper awareness of people, where they come from and what they are really about."*

A leader in the church also indicated that WYS has had a major impact. The leader observed that:

*"To share my story with the team who did not know my story, that was incredible and ...how am I as a leader with people I lead and to hear stories with people I share long hours with every day. The space to share stories was incredible. The process led to a huge perspective shift for me and made me see the people I work with in a different way. I am less judgmental around cultural things, for example, why people are late and issues around body language and issues of respect. For example, after we went through WYS, one of our staff passed away and a group of us went to the townships to visit the family. After visiting, the staff asked to be dropped off at home and I drove around Daveyton and realised how people live and how far people have to walk in the morning to either the trains or taxi's and why people are late sometimes."*

Other comments include:

*"I am more curious and more aware of diversity and of the need to ensure open communication with staff. I think I am now more aware of taking others' views into account as I am more aware of other peoples' journeys. And in terms of myself, I think the process gives you perspective of your own journey and your own growth."*

*"We sat in the group.....and for the first time looking at someone who is our gardener, someone who works in our kitchen, from a different perspective..."*

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

Respondents commented on the ways in which WYS had shifted relationships amongst staff members in the church. One staff member observed:

*"I was lonely and did not reach out to people but now I do. I am more curious about people and am reaching out to people more than I did before. In terms of my interaction at the church, with the staff, now we talk to each other and engage. Before it was just 'hi' and now we go for coffee and talk, and we share - we did not care before but now we are curious of each other and interact more."*

She confirmed that as a result of these engagements she now trusts her staff more. One member made a similar observation and stated that WYS has led to positive changes in the way that staff members interact with each other. They have learned more about their different cultures and backgrounds. He comments that:

*"My role for the past year or two - I have been the bridge - there are whites and blacks and I was in between. Now it has been helping- and it is working - and I pray that one day there will not be a need for a bridge, and it will just happen naturally."*

Another member commented that:

*"in terms of the overall change amongst staff, people who did not engage with each other are now engaging - from where we come from it is a type of breakthrough."*

This was confirmed by a further respondent who commented:

*"A further issue to emerge is that staff are now more vulnerable with each other and there is an element of trust emerging between staff."*

This respondent indicated that they have received feedback from many members of staff who commented that the WYS process was going down well and that people were becoming more open.

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

Respondents highlighted that WYS had led to changes amongst staff who work within the church. Changes amongst church members had not really been the primary focus at this stage. Respondents comments include:

*"I think in our group there were things shared that were not known by others and people were more open and vulnerable to sharing their story, whether deep or not. This has made a difference amongst the staff - there is a little more openness which we need to nurture, and it has allowed for easier flow of communication."*

*"Staff have started behaving differently and are more open...the more we carry on talking about it, the more it will change. But I think we do respect each other now and there is no fear of people talking to each other, there is a more normal relationship developing amongst the staff."*



*"We (the staff) now meet together and eat our meals together and we don't see colour when we eat our meals and share our meals together – there is a Xhosa dish, there is a Sotho dish, a Zulu dish and an English dish and we share our food and laugh. Before WYS, the white and black staff did not eat together and now during our interactions we teach each other our different lingo and it is a good space now."*

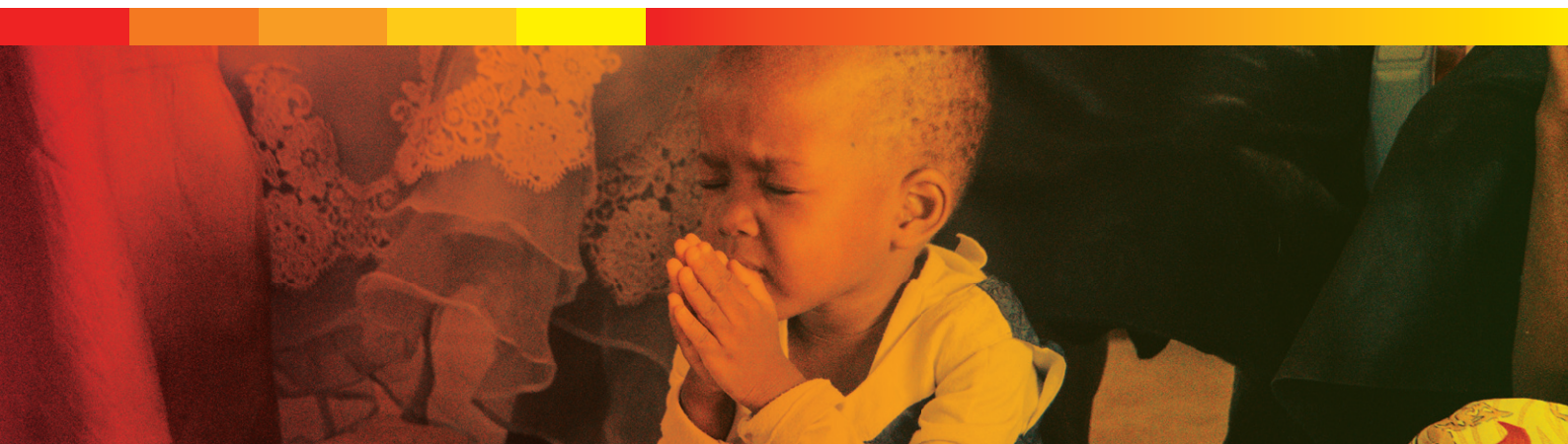
*"One guy is hardly engaged by any of the staff and we hardly ever hear him talk but at a prayer meeting yesterday he started to pray in Afrikaans and there was dead silence and it was beautiful."*

One respondent acknowledged though that change takes a long time and highlighted the value of encouraging curiosity as a step towards wider changes. The respondent observed:

*"You take some steps forward and some steps back. There is more engagement between staff but remember, this process takes time as there are some ingrained prejudices that are there and will flare up when there is pressure put on people. I think, to be fair, there is more curiosity about people and a bit more openness and empathy amongst some staff."*

Respondents indicated that the complexity of change is heightened as the programme is introduced to members of the congregation. In one case, the church leader reported that the church has introduced the concept of 'know your story' into the sermon which takes place every Sunday. In doing so, the sermon touches on issues related to diversity and otherness.

The church has also made other changes, for example the 'Peace of the Lord' is now done in all languages. Some members indicated that the WYS process, and subsequent changes, have led to an increased sense of unity and respect, *"they are now holding hands and they are now more open to black members and are being respectful"*. However, one leader observed that these changes have been met with some resistance, *"and I have noticed a drop in attendance"* (discussed further below).





## Building Relationships and Networks Beyond the Church

One church leader commented that there is now a focus on exploring how WYS could be relevant in making linkages across churches and this has resulted in *“an increased willingness to pray with other black churches”*.

### Within families

Many of the people exposed to WYS shared the process with others in their family. One member indicated:

*“For me, by sharing with my family, it opens communication. This is very important for me with family because my mother was effectively a single mom, my dad was in and out, and my brother we tried to shield him and tried not to be negative about my dad, so he saw no wrong. In view of this process, I see how open communications could benefit families.”*

### Within the wider community

Respondents primarily spoke of sharing with individuals in the wider community informally and within their friendship groups. This is a recent development that has not yet been followed up by the research process. However, it was evident that this sharing has meant that WYS has been shared with teachers who plan to implement WYS with their classes. In addition, others also indicated that they would share it in other environments. It would be valuable, at a later stage, to investigate and understand the impact that this has had on the wider environment.

### Challenges

As alluded to previously, the process is not without its challenges:

One church leader observed that when WYS was introduced they did not know what was going to happen and they were worried that this might be a *“waste of time.”* This highlighted a concern that was shared by others and it was evident that it required a champion to encourage people to enter the process. There was considerable evidence that once people went through the process, they realised *“it was something totally different.”*

Another concern that was highlighted by respondents is that for some the process can result in people reliving their pain. This view was confirmed by one of the respondents who commented:

*“I found the process unsettling as it brought up all old pain - I had a opposite reaction it upset me and I did not have a positive response to WYS, I did not share it with anyone – as I did not want to relive the process”.*

The challenge highlights the need to ensure that, in addition to ensuring that WYS is undertaken in a safe space, there is also a need to be sensitive to the emotions it may evoke, whether a person ultimately shares the story or chooses not to share the story.

In addition, a further, possibly inevitable factor, is that some people are uncomfortable, and in some cases resistant, with this process and this has to be managed within an institution. For example, one respondent stated that there are still challenges amongst staff for example:

*"Some of the older guys who are set in their ways have found this hard. There have been discussions and comments from these guys that we are trying too hard to force diversity and we should just allow things to happen. But if you are going to wait, you will wait forever."*

Another respondent observed that these challenges in part arise because people are afraid of losing privilege. The respondent observed though that through WYS he has:

*"...developed more empathy. I understand now that those resisting change, it is part of their story and their white privilege, and they think that if we push diversity, they will lose their privilege so they say, 'why do we have to push it?'."*

This challenge, as mentioned above, is even more apparent with members of the congregation. One church learner observed that he was:

*"getting push back from some of the congregation from what we are doing as a leadership. When I shared with the church, the response was not so great.... people were uncomfortable".*

The church leadership observed though that they are selecting to tackle these issues with the tools that they have acquired through WYS. A church leader commented that they felt that *"if the staff understand where we want to go, then it will be easier to speak to the congregation"*. This in turn will assist them to address the concerns of members of the congregation, though it is recognised that this may be an iterative and gradual process.

## What Happened to Get There?

### Description of what took place

This section provides a description of how WYS was introduced.

Northfield Methodist Church interviewees explained that they had worked with Heartlines many years ago when the church used some of Heartlines tools (such as '8 Films, 8 Values').

In terms of WYS, Heartlines approached the church leadership during 2017 and requested permission to show the movie 'Beyond the River' in the church, for its members and the broader Benoni community. About 300 people attended the viewing in September 2017.

The church leadership, together with Heartlines, organised a follow-up session a week later to discuss the movie and its implications. This discussion was attended by 30 people. Following this intervention, in 2018, Heartlines facilitated a breakfast for the broader Benoni community which was attended by two representatives from the church. At the breakfast, Heartlines provided an overview and explained what WYS intends to achieve. A respondent who attended the breakfast explained:

*"During this session they [Heartlines] explained the concept of a river of life with the aim of sharing our life stories through the river, ...we were excited, as the value of story-telling is immense. It has an impact in terms of making us to be vulnerable and it is a wonderful tool to break down barriers."*

After the introductory breakfast, the church leadership discussed the value of WYS, and a decision was taken to introduce WYS to the staff at Northfield Methodist Church. Arising from this decision, Heartlines ran one session in which participants undertook the 'River of Life' training and facilitated a WYS process. A respondent explained:

*"After this first Heartlines session, the staff met on our own without Heartlines and during that time we shared our stories."*

The second scheduled session with Heartlines was held a few weeks later. This involved an hour and 15-minute session with a Heartlines facilitator who provided questions for group discussion.

## Taking WYS Forward

### Sharing with the church staff members and community more widely

Church leaders and staff explained that following the introduction of WYS they began to share the WYS process with staff members. In addition, some church leaders and staff indicated that they had sought to share WYS with other church leaders.

### With friends and family

Church leaders and staff also indicate that they have begun to share their own stories with family and friends.

Respondents commented:

*"I spoke to my best friend about WYS and she is a teacher and I suggested that she should try it with her class."*

*"I immediately shared with my fiancé. At home I stay with another guy who is a missionary and I shared my story with him, and he shared his and I listened to his story. I then shared with my very close friend who works at John Wesley."*



### With related organisations

In addition, the church leadership decided to introduce WYS to the staff at the John Wesley seminary, which is the church's outreach facility and includes a community centre and pre-school. This training took place in September after the evaluation team had completed its initial fieldwork and therefore no interviews with the members of John Wesley have been included in this case study.

The Heartlines facilitator divided the staff into two groups and did WYS with the one group in the morning and the other group in the afternoon. The groups participated in other training activities such as the 'River of Life' and the 'Silent debate' (which is about finding out issues that people whisper in the corridors but don't talk about openly) and then created the space for the sharing of stories.

### With other churches and more broadly

Many respondents indicated that they shared WYS with individuals in other churches and more widely. Most of these respondents explained that they had shared it informally.

One respondent indicated that, *"I also shared it with another church in the greater Benoni area and then yesterday I was teaching at an NGO called Work for a Living and I shared WYS."*

Others indicated that they had used storytelling before and had found it very valuable indicating though that WYS had provided her with practical tools to continue to share stories.

*"I go out into communities every day and sometimes I counsel people. I think the approach of WYS is very practical kinds of principle and it teaches you how to listen and engage".*

One church leader commented:

*"I have not shared as yet – I am not a programmes person – but I believe in the ideals around what WYS is about and what it aims to promote. I would encourage people to buy into and embrace the Heartlines approach. For me, it is all about developing personhood and about encouraging the development of personhood of others... and how we engage as people".*

### Rationale for sharing stories

Reflecting on why respondents had shared WYS with their families and friends, a church leader, explained:

*"I want to expose my kids to a wider thinking. In terms of my family, the sharing was intentional as I wanted to expose my family to what WYS taught me."*

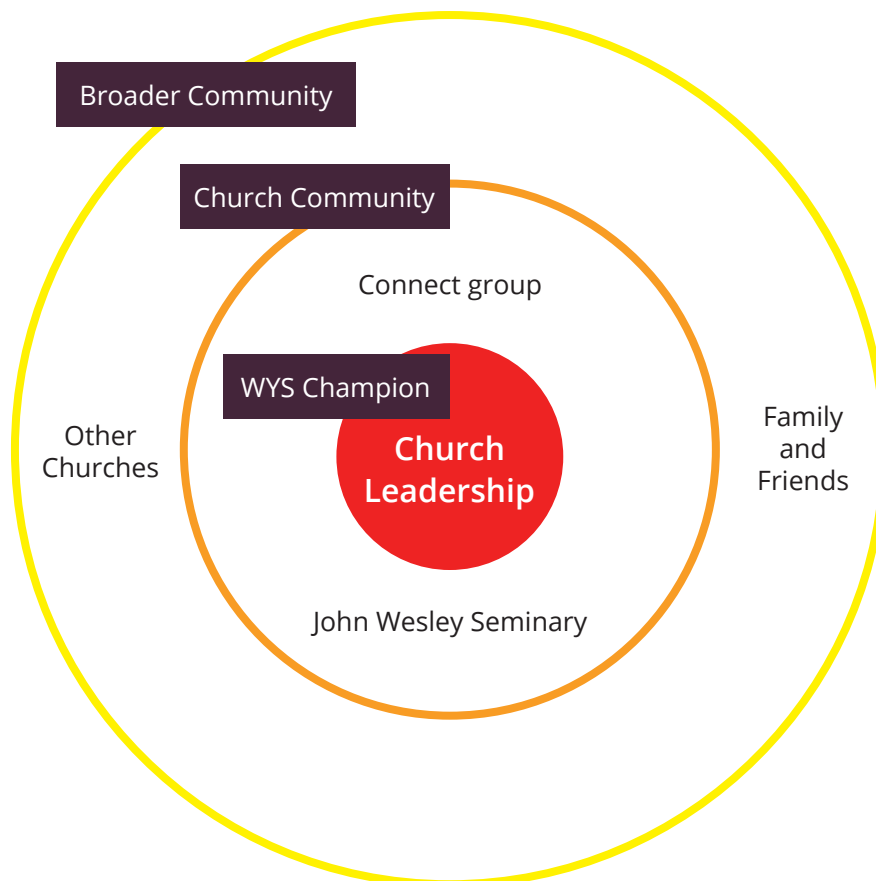
*“the power of sharing has opened another way of thinking for me and understanding people generally, so I wanted them to learn..... I wanted them to not just give up and have hope...”*

### Using resources

In most instances, where WYS was shared, this was done “informally” as they had not used the resources but instead, they explained the process of story-sharing and had shared stories and encouraged sharing stories. For example, one respondent stated:

*“The process of me sharing with others was informal in that I did not show them any resources, but I thought the river [concept] was incredible. For example, with my close group of friends, we just chatted, and I told them about the process, and they were intrigued”.*

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

#### The power of the story

Members spoke of the value of the story telling process, observing that this approach supported change and was accessible to people from different backgrounds, ages, cultures and languages.

A church leader observed that the mechanism of the story was the most important enabler. He observed:

*"I have always been comfortable with diversity but the WYS process has heightened my awareness of the power of story and giving people space to listen to someone else's story. This has changed my relationship with my staff."*

Another respondent commented:

*"The gift of the being able to tell the story and the space is huge for people – people become noticed. Can you imagine if it was ramped up across society it would be mind-blowing..."*

A church leader observed that the process:

*"...felt familiar and was comfortable. The reason I am saying this is that, in the pastoral space, we encourage conversation through the use of the narrative. So, the way Heartlines did it was comfortable for me - as it is our way. I think the whole approach was very powerful, and to see people from the cleaning staff to gardener, who had never shared their stories as they did not have a space to do so...it was very powerful".*

### **Using different methods**

One respondent observed that combining story telling with other methods was very valuable stating:

*"...the river one [River of life] for me was beautiful... the whole thing about the river, as I have never looked at life as the river and for me, where I put the start, and how I saw certain things in my life was so powerful".*

Further comments included:

*"Initially I was worried about my story and about how my drawing would come out. However, ultimately it was valuable for me and the process allowed me to reflect and evoked a lot of different emotions."*

*"I liked the methodology and using the river, as it made it easy to understand, and the approach catered for various members of staff. Often it is difficult to have a programme which deals with all educational levels of staff and the use of the river bridged the gap in terms of who was participating, and everyone's rivers looked different and that was cool."*

### **A space for openness and vulnerability**

Creating a safe space was a factor that respondents felt was vital to the success of the programme. Comments on this topic included:

*"I think just the space to share each other's stories was powerful – most staff did not really know each other and me being able to share as the minister."*

*"The Heartlines process gives us a space to be open and listen. Sometimes people fear to share but this was a space to share and listen to each other."*

*"I think the approach, which encourages people to share and enter a space of vulnerability, is important - and especially including leaders to share their stories..... a minister can go through his whole ministry and not share, but then he retires, and he shares his life story.... For example, it took one minister 40 years to share that he has been addicted to gambling. It was only then that he freed people up to talk about their own issues. The freedom to share in groups is so powerful and allows people to talk and share their own challenges".*

### **Opening the door to sharing**

What emerged strongly in this case study is that the value of WYS is strongest when it becomes part of on-going practice. Some respondents indicated that they shared the story telling approach on an almost daily basis. They commented that:

*"by me sharing, it creates the space for others to share. I have taken on board this approach and incorporated it into the way I engage, in terms of the work".*

### **Leading by example**

It was indicated that it had been really valuable when the leadership in the church led the way, observing that it was lovely to hear the Minister *"sharing his story, where he comes from and where he is now, and then we heard our cleaning ladies who shared"*.



## Hindering factors

The key hindering factor that was highlighted relates to the amount of time that was available for the introduction of WYS. Respondents stated:

*"The one concern I had about the process is that there was not have enough time to share. It was too short. We started but all of us had commitments in the day and it was too short to share properly – once you start the process it needs to be ongoing."*

*"I think when we initially met, the time was limited, and Heartlines did not have enough time and it was rushed. This is a result of miscommunication around how much time was needed and we were a bit rushed in terms of the training – miscommunication between Heartlines and ourselves and we could have done with more time it was too rushed".*

Other respondents also spoke of the way that the WYS process was structured. For example, one respondent indicated:

*"I think the process was good but the training took place over an extended period of time – we had our first session and then a month later we had our second session - but I think it was our issue – the training should have been closer together for more impact."*

Another challenge that was highlighted by one of the church leaders is that during the process, some people did not share deeply, and it made him realise that there is a real issue of trust. He observed:

*"There is nothing in the programme that can force people to share on a deep level, but it compromises the effectiveness of the programme."*

He suggested that this may be because they did not give the process enough time and commented that as a result, the effectiveness of the outcome was compromised and asked, "how much time do you need to be effective?"



## Conclusion

This case study illustrates how WYS is being implemented in the Northfield Methodist Church. It highlights that it introduced WYS with the intention of encouraging greater levels of inclusiveness amongst its members. The leadership team decided to begin with members of staff as they recognised that in order to transform the church, it would be vital to ensure that its staff was on board.

The case study has shown that in the main, staff members have become more open to 'others' and are less judgmental, though there are still some individuals, largely older individuals, who remain resistant.

In terms of the church congregation and broader community, the case study has shown that the values associated with WYS have begun to be introduced through the sermon series and movie viewings to the congregation. However, the process of implementing WYS has not been fully rolled out. Staff members report that whilst some members of the congregation appear to be open to this direction others are more resistant.

The case study has also shown that staff members have begun to share WYS with family and friends, members in other churches as well as to an NGO, Work for a Living. The process has also been now introduced at the John Wesley seminary.

In conclusion, the church leadership confirm the value of WYS to encourage inclusivity amongst black and white members of the church.

## Epilogue

Tony has experienced a sharing amongst the staff of his church. He is encouraged by the way that most of them have embraced WYS and have even begun to share their stories with family and friends. He has also been able to identify those members of staff who are resistant to change and has noted that they will need more time and encouragement. This is the first step in a process, and he would like to see greater changes in the future that help to promote diversity amongst his congregation.

## Contact us

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