

# HEARTLINES

The Centre for Values Promotion

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

One Life Church - Case Study  
27 September 2019



# Prologue

One Life Church is a non-denominational multisite church under the auspices of New Covenant Ministries International (N.C.M.I). This Church is situated in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province: with the main church located in Pietermaritzburg. It has 22 different branches across the Province.

The church is devoted to loving God, loving the people and making disciples of all nations. However, they realised that there was little interaction amongst the members of the church. To overcome this challenge 'Connect groups' were introduced. They meet regularly, talk about life, God, or the Bible, and simply do life together. This has been an important factor in making larger groups feel smaller. However, the church leaders continued to consider ways to strengthen these relationships. Stacey is a Connect group leader. She is passionate about making a difference.

## 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 focuses on how WYS has contributed to One Life Church with the focus on one Connect group. The case study is based on interviews with leaders and members from One Life Church in KZN. As part of this case study we undertook face to face and telephonic interviews with two leaders and four members from the same Connect group.

## Changes Resulting from WYS

During this case study we explored whether WYS had contributed to changes amongst individual members of the Connect group, the church leadership and more broadly. Through the interviews it was evident that members felt that WYS has resulted in positive changes at these different levels. They observed that it has changed the way that they interact and perceive each other. In this case study we also explored the reasons for any changes that may have taken place.

### Personal changes

All the respondents indicated that WYS had helped them to develop empathy. They have developed an increased understanding that every person has a story to tell. They observed that they are now more cautious about what they say to other people because they know that there is a story behind each person, how they express themselves and how they behave. They reported that they try to ask open questions and listen more carefully, resulting in more meaningful conversations and a much better understanding of each other. They commented that these shifts – in asking and listening – have aided their interactions in the Connect group and the broader congregation.

WYS has contributed to the personal development and the strengthening of relations between members. One leader observed:

*"I am a leader in church and people look up to me because I really spend more time up front facilitating or being an MC. I also wanted to give my group a real sense of who I am. Many church members have distorted views and perceptions of who their leaders are. This is because we always appear strong, many times, ready to help others and all that. Basically, leaders are viewed as heroes with no problems. I knew that telling my real story would help people in my group to understand better..... I knew that telling them [about his past life] would help them realise that church leaders are not perfect."*

Another leader stated his opinion another way:

*"I am a leader in church, and I knew that the picture that many people give to church leaders is not true. This point challenged me to really be vulnerable and tell my story. I wanted my group to know that church leaders are human, make mistakes, and go through life challenges like everybody else."*

### **Connecting with others in the group**

All the members of the group agreed that the timing for the introduction of WYS was opportune. Sharing their stories opened doors to each other and created a basis for conversation. They observed that before WYS, they would arrive at the venue and everyone would sit alone, minding their own business, waiting for the group facilitator to start the group.

During the session they would read the Bible, pray and discuss the Bible, and after a closing prayer, they would walk individually to their cars and go home. That was it. After WYS, they started to open up to each other, greet each other with enthusiasm, ask each other deeper, meaningful personal questions.

Those who arrive at the venue in time, no longer sit alone in their little corners and wait to start the session. They take the initiative to greet and start conversations, they ask each other about their real-life challenges, they pray for each other over those challenges and *"just love one another"*.

Members commented that these changes have also made it easier for those who are new in the group to connect with those who have known each other for a longer time. The older members now make it their mission to introduce themselves to the new members on a personal level, speak to them and make them comfortable.

This was confirmed by a new group member who said that after WYS he felt that now he was part of the group because he could talk about life in general with all of them.



These changes were well illustrated by one respondent who observed:

*"I noticed a big change in our group. We are united [more] than ever before. We speak to each other; we listen and laugh together."*

Another member commented:

*"I have noticed a change with the other members of our group as well. Hearing other peoples' stories opened the heart to accept each other, it has brought us close to each other. We try our best to connect deeper, in a deeper level".*

One church leader confirmed these views:

*"I thought what an exciting programme! I say that because I have been part of a church and Connect groups for years, but we never really got to talk about ourselves and get to know each other. It was always about the Bible and God, which of course I appreciate, but I always knew that we were missing the personal touch amongst each other."*

Another church leader observed:

*"Telling our stories built trust, brought deeper learning, vulnerability and toughness. I say tough because we normally don't tell our stories and it is always difficult to talk about myself. After we watched the movie and listening to our leader tell her story, I was excited because now I knew that this is something we needed in our group and ultimately the church. Great method in general."*

### **Changes in the church**

The WYS experience has produced obvious changes in the Connect group. They are no longer just a group; they have become a Team. People communicate openly with each other, share their thoughts, opinions and ideas with members of their team; as well as taking into consideration what others have to say.

Team members are always happy to assist others when they need a helping hand with something. There is new energy. Now, they understand that everyone is unique and are able to offer their own experiences and knowledge that others may not have. They accept the variety of personalities, age groups, cultures, and races they have in the team. They are keen to learn from each other; they know that everyone can share creativity and a broad range of ideas.

WYS has helped the Connect members to realise that they have a strong Team leader that they trust and respect. Many individuals highlighted her skills and appreciated her ability to facilitate. One member summarised this:

*"Our group leader is doing a good job, holding the team together and is responsible for setting the pace, offers encouragement and motivation, and keeps all members of the team updated."*

They also appreciate their leader for encouraging them to take responsibility for leading some activities. If she is not available, someone can easily take over.

The WYS experience has encouraged members to feel more enthusiastic about coming to church and has even led to people returning to the church. Respondents stated that members of the Connect group looked forward to their group each week with excitement, because they knew that they would be listening to three more people tell their stories. Members looked forward to getting to know these people.

One of the interviewees shared the story of how WYS had encouraged a couple to return to the church.

*"This couple had been part of the church many years before WYS. However, because of a lack of interaction, the husband had stopped coming to church. He felt disconnected and saw no need for him to continue going to church. He stayed away for almost ten years. During all of this time, his wife continued to go to church. His wife managed to convince her husband to attend the Connect group with her. He reluctantly went there every Wednesday, but after the introduction of WYS, he started enjoying attending the meetings and observed that he always looked forward to the next week. He attributed this change to what he described as shifts in the group since the introduction of WYS. Specifically, he observed that since WYS the group is tackling the real-life challenges faced by members rather than just praying every problem away without facing it and intentionally tackling it head on".*



One person put it this way:

*"I am more understanding, empathise and sympathise with people. I try my best to understand why people do things the way they do; why they act or think the way they do".*

Connect group members believe that WYS will help the group to grow in strength very quickly. They reported that since WYS they do not just interact more but have changed how they work as a group. They now agree on and set team goals based on outcomes and results, rather than just depending on one or two people to come up with ideas and decisions. Each member of the team contributes equally with the understanding that the group needs their active participation. They feel a sense of belonging to the team, are committed to contributing and really care about the success of the team.

## Building Relationships and Networks Beyond the Group

When interviewed for this research, none of the group members had yet taken WYS beyond their Connect group, had applied WYS methodology nor told their story apart from in the Connect group. The group leader observed that for her this process was test and trial. She wanted to introduce the process to her group before the whole Church was exposed to WYS.

However, members commented that despite only using the WYS methodology in their Connect group, they believe that WYS has helped them to improve their relationships with people in general. They commented that the lessons they learnt about each other were generally applicable in everyday life with other people, at home, church or at work.

At this stage, the spread of WYS has been confined, as depicted in the diagram below:



## Challenges

Some members were initially apprehensive. When the group leader told them about WYS, they were not sure if they wanted to participate in sharing their stories. After watching the movie and listening to the group leader tell her story, they continued to be uncomfortable because they knew that they would also be expected to tell their story to the group. With reserved personalities, they did not feel comfortable being the centre of attention with everyone listening to them. This felt pressurising, with “all eyes on the speaker”. One person said:

*“I was wondering what I was going to share about because I really don't like talking about myself. I did not grow up that way. I had never told my story to people in that way before. I was nervous”.*

Another challenge was vulnerability. WYS was challenging people to share their sensitive stories openly. One person said, “I felt vulnerable and at some point, asking myself can I trust these people?”. These challenges were eventually overcome because every person in the group was able to share their story. The group leader was proactive in identifying and encouraging those individuals who were apprehensive about sharing their story. She held one-on-one conversations with them, allowing them to overcome their fear of sharing their stories.

## What Happened to Get There?

### Description of what took place

The previous section highlighted the changes that have taken place since the introduction of WYS. This section provides a description of when and how respondents were introduced to WYS and reflects on whether it has been taken forward and if so, where, and in what ways.

### Introducing WYS to Youth for Christ

One team leader works for an organisation called Youth For Christ (YFC). YFC focuses on engaging with young people. They offer personal development, sports coaching and after-school initiatives, leadership development, Youth Ministry development and coaching a range of life skills. As part of this work, she is facilitating programmes at their centre in Pietermaritzburg.



This team leader attended a Heartlines workshop in Durban, in May 2019. She explained that she was invited there as part of YFC with the intention of introducing WYS to the organisation. During this workshop they went through the WYS materials and were taught how to use the WYS tools effectively.

The aim was to create a pool of facilitators who would take the programme to their churches and organisations across KZN. Although she has not yet introduced WYS to YFC, she has introduced it to her church. YFC already had planned programmes for the year and so there was no space for her to share WYS. She indicated that she is planning to introduce WYS to YFC early next year.

She explained that in addition to the practical constraints of introducing WYS into YFC, she also thought it would be best to start at her church. Her rationale was that the work of the church aligns well with what Heartlines is trying to achieve. She indicated that as her church has 22 branches, this would allow her to expand the reach of the WYS through the church. She introduced WYS to her Connect group two weeks after the initial training. In the initial session, they watched the 'Beyond the River' movie and outlined the WYS methodology. The following week, the team leader shared her story. Each subsequent week, three Connect members shared their stories.

## Taking WYS Forward

At the time of the research interviews, the group had not yet taken WYS methodology forward outside of the Connect group, however, all the members of the group had just finished telling their stories. The group had collectively taken the decision to approach the leadership of their church to ask them to introduce WYS to the whole church across the 22 branches.

## Impeding or Promoting Factors

### Having a champion

A key finding from this case study is that WYS needs someone who is going to intentionally take it forward; someone who believes in the method and is passionate about making a difference. WYS needs a champion who can plan and follow up with others where required. This requires leadership and trust as observed by one church leader who observed, *"I wanted to plant trust in my group"*.

### The commitment to building and changing

Respondents observed that they have learnt that they are willing to go an extra mile for each other. One member said:

*"I was not that much keen to share, but I shared my story because I wanted people to know that I am part of the group. It was a group decision that we will share, so I had to be brave and share. I was getting to know people in a deeper level by hearing their stories, and I wanted to return the favour. I wanted my group members to know me more. I also wanted to set an example by sharing because I knew that I was not the only one who wondered what they are going to share."*



## Conclusion

This case study highlights the value of WYS: it illustrates how it can support members of the church to grow, develop in confidence, trust, empathy and love for each other. This programme helped this group to build deeper relationships. WYS helped members to enjoy each other's company. Building positive relationships with one another has led to a more relaxed environment and laughter.

One person said:

*"This is one of the best things I have ever done. Hearing other people's stories opened my heart. It helped me understand the things other people go through and to connect deeper. As a result of WYS, our group just opened talks about forgiveness. We encourage each other to share our past hurts and forgive those who wronged us before. We trust each other, we cry together, we listen to each other and help each other where we can."*

This case study illustrates how WYS, with limited resources besides time, when taken on by a champion - who has come to believe in the power of personal storytelling - can lead to positive changes in empathy among those who have engaged in sharing their stories. While this has only been tested with a small group at "One Life Church", it has the potential to make further positive changes with the broader congregation.

## Epilogue

Leaders in the church were not sure a movie and telling stories would help. They have been delighted by the impact of WYS on the Connect group participants. These members now interact and appreciate each other more. They want to get to know more about the people they interact with at church. They have developed love and respect for others and are more grateful than ever before. The story for this church is not over. Stacey is committed to taking WYS forward and excited to see how it will impact on the whole "One Life Church". This is a story worth following up to see how it unfolds as other branches of "One Life Church" take up WYS.

## Contact us

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