

**HEARTLINES**

The Centre for Values Promotion

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

Five Anglican churches in the Western Cape - Case Study  
31 October 2019



# Prologue

Lorreta and Robert are leaders of two different Anglican Churches. Both churches are located in what used to be considered traditionally white suburbs in the Western Cape. In recent years, these church leaders have increasingly had to deal with a more diverse church membership, representing the general demographics of the Western Cape. Members of the churches know each other, but they do not connect and as a result, both leaders are grappling with the challenges of trying to build more racially integrated communities. At the same time, church leaders who were part of a 'What's Your Story' (WYS) training in May 2019 were also trying to get their leadership to buy into the implementation of WYS in order to address increasingly difficult racial dynamics that are playing out in the province.

## 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 promote 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. It focuses on the work being done by two Anglican churches which are trying to build more racially integrated communities. The first, St Martin's Anglican Church is in Bergvliet. Bergvliet is a traditionally white suburb; however, it is located near coloured communities from Grassy Park and surrounding areas below the railway line. The railway used to act as a geographic marker for separating apartheid suburbs. Church membership now includes white, coloured and black including foreign nationals from the Congo, Zimbabwe and Rwanda. These people were assisted by the church during xenophobic attacks and have remained to worship with this congregation. The second is the Church of the Holy Spirit, located between Retreat, Muizenburg and Kirstenhof, and draws in all racial groups represented in the Western Cape and from a broad age range.

Whilst the primary focus of this case study is the work being done by these two churches to implement WYS, it also touches on input from other church leaders who participated in a Heartlines training workshop in Malmesbury (Western Cape) during May 2019. The intention of the training was to bring together church leaders from diverse backgrounds, provide them with the tools to address the racial issues that have emerged within their changing communities and re-build their connectedness with members of their congregations.



The focus of the input from these church leaders is aimed at assessing the impact of the workshop and highlight how they are now trying to introduce WYS into their churches.

This case study is based on face-to-face and telephonic interviews:

- St Martin's Anglican Church in Bergvliet: Two church leaders and five 'cell' leaders (churches have cell groups where small groups of congregants meet either at people's houses or at the church to learn together or discuss issues that form part of the church programmes)
- Church of the Holy Spirit: Two church leaders
- Three additional church leaders who participated in the Malmesbury training during May 2019.

We planned to engage with youth in a focus group discussion to get their perspective on change within the church. However, during the period that the research was being conducted, concerns about levels of violence against women and children were brought to our attention. The church made the decision to cancel the youth focus group. This meant that the feedback about what has changed amongst the youth in the church is based on the perspectives of the leadership.

## 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. We found that the church leaders emerged from the two-day session Malmesbury training "excited" and many indicated that this was a "life changing" event which they wished to share with others in the church and in the surrounding communities. Those church leaders who did not undergo the training also found that WYS had a major impact on them. We explored the factors that enabled these changes.

### Personal change

Church leaders and congregants of St Martin's highlighted the personal changes that they experienced through being able to share their stories. They observed that WYS "changed how they view people – especially people of a different colour". In one case a church leader commented that WYS had changed the direction of his life.

The majority of members of St Martin's who were trained in WYS stated that they are now "more aware that there is a story behind a person, and you cannot judge a person by just looking at them." Another member indicated that she was "less judgmental and more open and more compassionate and more curious about people." A further participant said WYS "pushed me on my journey to see people differently and be more open".

One church leader commented that she could not believe that she had shared her story with the community, "as it was so uncharacteristic of me." She elaborated:

*"I did not trust people easily and still struggle with it. I'm the kind of person who does not like people to be in my space – I have tried to allow people into my space and to trust more."*

She observed that one of the reasons for this shift was that she was so surprised by the response to her sharing, "the community felt that I was bold and honest and the impact on me was to see how honest people were to share with us – they trusted me with their story."

She added that because of her upbringing (she is coloured):

*"I was scared of black people – like some of the foreign nationals in our church, but I am trying now. I am less judgemental, and I think I am more curious about people, I have more empathy and respect towards people..."*

The leadership at the Church for the Holy Spirit stated that WYS had given them the tools to work with and engage young people and that *"watching the movie gave me the words and helped me to tell my story."* The leadership added that WYS has changed the way they relate to people and indicated that they have learnt new skills and acquired the tools to deal more effectively with people. Two church leaders who both participated in the Malmesburg training and are in the process of taking WYS into their respective churches, highlighted how WYS had impacted on them as individuals.

One church leader indicated that WYS was *"affirming"* and *"it was great to have that engagement so as to develop relationships that you would not have had."* In addition, he believed, it gave him insights into *"others"*.

*"It added to my conviction that I need to be involved and help people to come to a different relationship and their responsibility and response as a church in terms of social justice."*

Another church leader stated that not only did the WYS process motivate him to take a new direction in his life but

*"it has changed the way I see people. Whilst I work in underprivileged areas, I am critical about the way things are but then I watched the movie [Beyond the River] and it shows us how we can help and strengthen each other and understand each other. It was an eye opener on how not to be critical and judgmental and really understand where people come from."*

He commented that when he went into the WYS training:

*"I was discouraged about my life and what I have accomplished...The Heartlines people really motivated me and gave me a new direction in my life..."*

He came out of the process and decided to refocus and recommit to his work in his community. He concluded:

*"Sometimes you deal with certain people of certain race groups and because of one's upbringing you judge what they do, but through this process, my eyes opened to see the beauty in others".*

## Connecting with others in the church

Respondents stated that WYS has helped them to build trust and see people differently. The church leaders at St Martin's argued that WYS is so important as prior to this programme congregants sat *"next to our brothers and sisters and we don't know their story and we judge them because of their colour."*

Commenting on the changes that have been realised, one church leader was of the view:

*"People are more connected and if the cell groups have drawn closer to one another and now they really know who the people are they are sitting next to. Then that is progress, but we are still on a journey."*

In this regard, another leader observed that he grew up scared of white people and indicated that the WYS process and the movie helped him to tell his story and to reduce his fear of others.

Some comments from St Martin's congregants include:

*"I think through the sharing of stories there was a lot of healing and closening of relationships".*

*"Some people had known each other for ages and did not really know them."*

*"Groups have grown closer to one another, whereas in the past they did not mix and kind of would stick to ourselves."*

Church leaders at St Martin's point out that members are more friendly, open and tolerant towards each other. A coloured church leader stated that people were behaving differently towards her and they have *"changed towards me."*

At a second church, the Church of the Holy Spirit, the focus of WYS has been on the youth. The leadership of the church, commenting on this experience, indicated that:

*"[It used to be] hard for strangers to come into the group and now if a youth had to come into the group, they are made to feel more welcoming. The youth are less judgmental and more supportive of each other."*





*"[Youth] are starting to grasp the concept of empathy between each other's problems. For example, before if one person in the group talked about his/her dog dying, those poorer youth had no empathy and said in our community people are dying."*

*"We have gone from a place where youth held onto their differences. They have now moved on and recognise that there are ways to know each other and that this leads to understanding of each other."*

### **Changes in the church**

One leader (Church of the Holy Spirit) observed that the process has resulted in changes in the values of the church stating that *"there is a growing process of engagement"* and the church is increasingly seen as a *"safe space for youth"*.

Leaders of the Church of the Holy Spirit indicated that the congregation were not used to leaders taking time out to listen to them and to take the time to get to know them.

*"Our participation was important in terms of rectifying the level of respect and hierarchy which exists in the church...WYS has created and grown a safe space for our youth."*

He added:

*"We used WYS to deal with comfort and discomfort – we wanted to create a space that welcomed everyone... So, in the process, the black community kids started owning the space and the white kids were not displaced in the process..."*

He also commented that as a result of the process, *"our language has changed from spaces of discomfort into braver spaces."* As a result of the WYS process, the Church is now not only encouraging friendships between youth from different communities but also involving their parents by holding a youth/parent braai so that the parents can get to know each other.

He added:

*"We are seeing the application of WYS on different levels – how do we maintain the friendships that we started and maintain them appropriately and build on them? Then on the other side, we realised with the youth, how to facilitate the next engagements and how to get youth welcoming each other and then another part to get youth integrated into the church..."*

Another church leader was of the view that the WYS process had led to "noticeable changes" stating that his church (St Martin's) had used the period of Lent to focus on WYS and there was a lot of healing through that process.

## Building Relationships and Networks Beyond the Church

St Martin's explained that their immediate focus is on building relationships within the church. They are currently going through a transition period as the pastor has recently retired. This view was echoed by leaders in the second church, who indicated that while they have relationships with NGOs and existing church networks, the focus at present is to consolidate and build a community within the congregation.

However, there was also evidence that individuals within these churches have supported WYS in a range of other places. This included a focus on sharing with family members, linking with other churches (as highlighted below).

### Within families

Church leaders indicated that members had shared WYS with their families and that this had led to real changes in some families. For example, one leader commented:

*"Once my family were aware of my story, it changed the whole family dynamics. They see the different approach I am adopting. I am being more open to them and speak to them easier and they are speaking to me easier – it has changed my personal relations."*

### Across churches

Whilst the two churches mentioned above have an internal focus, two church leaders (who were part of the Malmesburg training and have yet to implement WYS in their churches) have been exploring how to introduce WYS to other churches.

One church leader explained:

*"our church hierarchy is insular, and it moves within known circles and areas they control and that is a challenge..."*

In order to try and overcome this:

*"We are exploring an approach - that we set up a session that the church leaders are invited to with other church leaders in other areas. The aim is to link in with other local churches and across the boundaries and have exposure at different levels."*

He added:

*"I was pleased that there is such an initiative, as whilst our church is white, our home group is not and we are struggling to bridge the divide and integrating them into the church. I think the Church nationally and the issue of transformation in the church is a huge challenge - to bridge the ethnic and economic divides."*

### **Within the wider community**

St Martin's indicated that, as a mission church, it does a lot of outreach work.

*"Our pastor moves amongst all different denominations and he has tried to cross the bridge to Lavender Hill (is part of what is known as the Cape Flats and is known to have high levels of gang-related crime) and the townships."*

At the point of this evaluation it was too soon to comment on the changes that this work has yielded.

### **Challenges**

One challenge that emerged relates to the church's commitment to charity work and a lack of understanding the distinction between caring and empathy. As a result, there were a few respondents who believed that this approach *"did not make a difference."*

Further, whilst church leaders are encouraged by how WYS is beginning to deal with diversity in a real way, they highlighted that this is not without its challenges and was not *"an easy process as there is a lot of distrust."* They voiced concern that trust was necessary for people to meaningfully and honestly share their stories. For example, one church leader explained that the parents of the kids who had participated in WYS had been concerned at the outset as they *"thought the outcome was to frame and highlight white guilt"*. The parents were concerned that the kids would come away feeling more guilty. He observed:

*"with time, this changes - as people see that WYS creates a new safe space for youth."*

The other challenge highlighted by church leaders is that they were anxious about *"how [best] to engage with other churches and share fellowship and bridge the racial divide."*

# What Happened to Get There?

## Description of what took place

This section provides a description of when and how respondents were introduced to WYS, how it was taken forward, where and in what ways. St Martin's was introduced to WYS through Pastor BI who has a relationship with Heartlines. He gave the pastor of St Martin's some materials including video clips, the workbook and the movie, 'Beyond the River'. The church leadership decided to introduce the WYS material in the period of Lent. Each year, during Lent, the church chooses a topic to focus on. The WYS intervention was targeted at cell groups.

Following discussions between Heartlines and the church, Heartlines came to train cell group leaders. The training included the 'Beyond the River', 'movie, some video clips and the motivation for story-sharing. After the training, cell leaders then went into their cell groups and engaged with group members around WYS. This resulted in about 100 members of the church being exposed to WYS. St Martin's has around 400 congregants. One church leader pointed out that many people *"encouraged us to do WYS at this stage in our nation's development."*

The engagement between Heartlines and the Church of the Holy Spirit began about two to three years previously when the church was trying to build a true community and trying to find ways to integrate diversity into the congregation. Through these interactions, it emerged that one of the church leaders was trying to get involved with helping youth in the community. However, he indicated that he did not have the language to talk to them and *"we were trying to find the tools to get more real integration."* The church decided to pilot WYS with the youth first. The youth congregation was challenging in its diversity and distrust

*"We wanted to deal with the diversity of the youth. There was one group who were very privileged and then another group from poor areas around Westlake. We realised that it was important for us to be discovering what it would mean to use WYS as a catalyst for us to get to know each other better."*

Heartlines facilitated a once-off event with about 57 youth between the ages of 13-21. This focused on storytelling and some people shared their stories. After this, during the June school holidays, the church organised a three-day event focused on *"discovering us, our talents and discovering each other."* One church leader explained:

*"We used WYS to deal with comfort and discomfort – for us it was about who was welcome in the room. The black community kids started owning the space and it was not at the expense of displacing the white kids but rather, we wanted everyone to come together and talk about it holistically, in a space that welcomes everyone and how we journey together."*

Once the process with the youth has unfolded, *"we want to take WYS to the rest of the church."* The church has held discussions with Heartlines to explore taking the youth process further with the rest of the congregation.

# Taking WYS Forward

Respondents indicated that they shared WYS in different ways. Some church leaders and members shared with their immediate family and friends, while others shared with their colleagues across several churches. One church leader, involved in human resources, took WYS to his workplace and is using this approach as part of his work.

At St Martin's, the church leaders and some members shared the approach with family and friends. However, one member indicated that she had not shared WYS as *"I share about forgiveness and love all the time with people."* One church leader pointed out that she would love to expand it, *"but we are in transition as our pastor is going on retirement and we are not sure what is next."* At the Church of the Holy Spirit, church leaders also indicated that they had shared WYS mainly with family and friends at this point.

The church leader who participated in the Malmesbury training added that he wants to take WYS into his church and the network of churches that he belongs to. He indicated, when the *"opportunity is right"* he will do so but in the interim he has begun to explore WYS with the youth ministry in his church. He is involved with youth in his community and wants to introduce it to home cell meetings. He indicated:

*"We have young people from very diverse backgrounds with some coming from the gang and drug affected areas and others coming from the suburbs."*

He pointed out:

*"[For some, a] lot of things have happened to them and they have powerful stories to tell but they are not yet open to sharing."*

He is hopeful that WYS would create the space for them to share as he believes:

*"A lot of our people have potential, dreams and aspirations and the biggest hindrance from shifting is being able to share your stories which could be transformative for many people – the challenge is for people to share their story and not to be intimidated or afraid."*

## Using resources

The responses to the resources was very positive. One pastor (who has subsequently retired) indicated that the materials were *"impressive"*, and he was encouraged by the good quality. Another pastor, sharing WYS with his youth group, is using the workbook as well as the 'Race of life' material. Cell leaders at St Martin's shared the methodology and some stories from some of the videos with their cell groups. Most participants shared WYS informally without using any of the tools.



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

#### Story telling with honesty

Whilst all acknowledge that the telling of stories is critical for people to begin to understand each other, they observed that what contributed to change is talking with honesty. A respondent stated:

*"It is not just about telling a story, it is telling story in complete honesty."*

A further factor contributing to change is the deliberate sharing of stories across groups that may not have known much about each other. For example, one leader commented:

*"I was surprised to hear their stories in life and during apartheid and one or two (white people) apologised to us (black people) because of apartheid. I did not expect it, but it was humbling for me to think that a person of another colour humbled themselves and apologised."*

### **Buy in from church leadership**

One church leader explained that WYS needs to target "permission givers" as well as training pastors to ensure that the programme is championed.

Further, if church leaders do not begin to implement WYS almost immediately after training, the impetus is lost, and the busy church programme can overtake such events. But as one leader points out:

*"Change is a process and people need to be informed on a continuous basis. I am on this journey to use the programme and to share it with people and to see the transformation in their lives."*

He added that the challenge is consolidating the momentum and ensuring that more church leaders see the value of WYS as a tool. This initiates a conversation to see the power of personal story telling. Change, he states, "starts with us and when people see change in us, they will get curious."

### **Hindering factor**

#### **Age of participants**

At one church, most members who participated in WYS were retired. Some indicated that:

*"by that stage they are already on their own path and the impact is limited".*



## Conclusion

The case study illustrates how WYS is being implemented in some churches in the Western Cape and whilst church leaders claim that *"it is a process"*, there has already been an impact on a personal level and between groups of people, particularly with the youth.

On a personal level, people have become more curious about each other and their stories and are less judgmental. Others feel more connected. Church leaders highlighted their respective fears of *"others"* having grown up in racially divided communities and how they are now more open and less judgmental.

Within church congregations, people felt more connected when people shared their stories honestly. There was a profound impact on congregants when experiences of apartheid were shared. Church leaders are trying to get their leadership to begin to bridge the divide between white and black churches through interactions with other churches and broader communities.

Despite recent implementation, there are signs of people sharing WYS with family and friends, in workplaces and more importantly, amongst other church leaders. There is a strong commitment by the church leaders interviewed to ensure that others begin to use WYS as a tool for transformation and committing to higher levels of integration between different racial groups. As one church leader pointed out, WYS provides added insight into *"others"*. At one church, a safe space for youths from differing backgrounds was created.

## Epilogue

Loretta and Robert took the first step to begin implementing WYS in their respective churches. Loretta feels more comfortable with the black members in her church whilst Robert has gained the skills to engage with youth. He and his leadership team have begun to bridge the divide between youth from different environments.

Both have observed that members in their churches are more connected and more curious about each other. As one church leader summarises: *"We need to get the conversation going and bring down the wall that separates us."*

The signs are there for Loretta and Robert that this is starting to happen, particularly amongst the youth, where the church has sought to create a safe space for them to engage.

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