

HEARTLINES

THE CENTRE FOR VALUES PROMOTION

WHAT'S **YOUR** STORY?

Evaluation Summary



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Introduction

Heartlines' "What's Your Story?" (WYS) programme was designed as an easy-to-implement and adaptable intervention to build social cohesion. WYS uses a storytelling methodology that encourages individuals to share personal reflections and stories and, in so doing, promotes understanding, empathy and trust.

In 2017, Heartlines contracted Singizi Consulting Africa to conduct an external evaluation of the Templeton Religion Trust-funded WYS programme that was rolled out between 2017 and 2020.

Evaluation Objectives

The evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. Can a campaign that encourages people to tell each other their personal stories, in supportive contexts, increase empathy amongst those involved?
2. Does the fostering of greater empathy of individuals for each other in group settings improve cohesion and, therefore, the functioning of the group?

Methodology

At the start of the initiative, Singizi worked with Heartlines to develop a programme theory for WYS, and this was used as the basis for the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework. Singizi then supported Heartlines to set up systems for the gathering of routine monitoring data and completed a formative evaluation midway through the programme, as well as a summative evaluation at the end of the programme.

Key elements of the evaluations included:

■ **Retrospective baseline survey:** A total of 789 individuals (34% of all individuals trained in WYS at that point) who had been trained in how to facilitate WYS completed the retrospective baseline at the time of the formative evaluation. Of the 789 people, 624 were from churches and 87 were from workplaces. At the point of the summative evaluation, an additional 910 respondents (36% of all those trained between the formative and summative evaluations) from churches completed the survey. No workplaces were surveyed at the point of the summative evaluation as this component of the programme was completed towards the end of the formative evaluation.

■ **Qualitative interviews:** Singizi conducted interviews and/or focus group discussions with individuals who had been involved in WYS interventions. This included religious leaders from 21 institutions, as well as interviewees from workplaces.

Based on this, Heartlines and Singizi developed an integrated report, as well as case studies of WYS in churches. These focused on understanding the ways in which WYS expands in different contexts and the changes that this contributed to. Singizi developed eight WYS case studies across four provinces in South Africa: two in Gauteng, three in North West province, two in KwaZulu-Natal, and one in the Western Cape. The case studies involved multiple interviews and focus groups, beginning with the individual/s responsible for implementing WYS, and then additional interviews and focus groups that were selected using a snowball methodology. These generally included church leaders, parishioners, and other members of a community who were reached through the cascading of WYS.



Programme Theory

CULTURE/VALUES/NORMS/SYSTEMS : promoting the virtue of love (empathy) at a time when political, ethnic and religious strife is on the rise

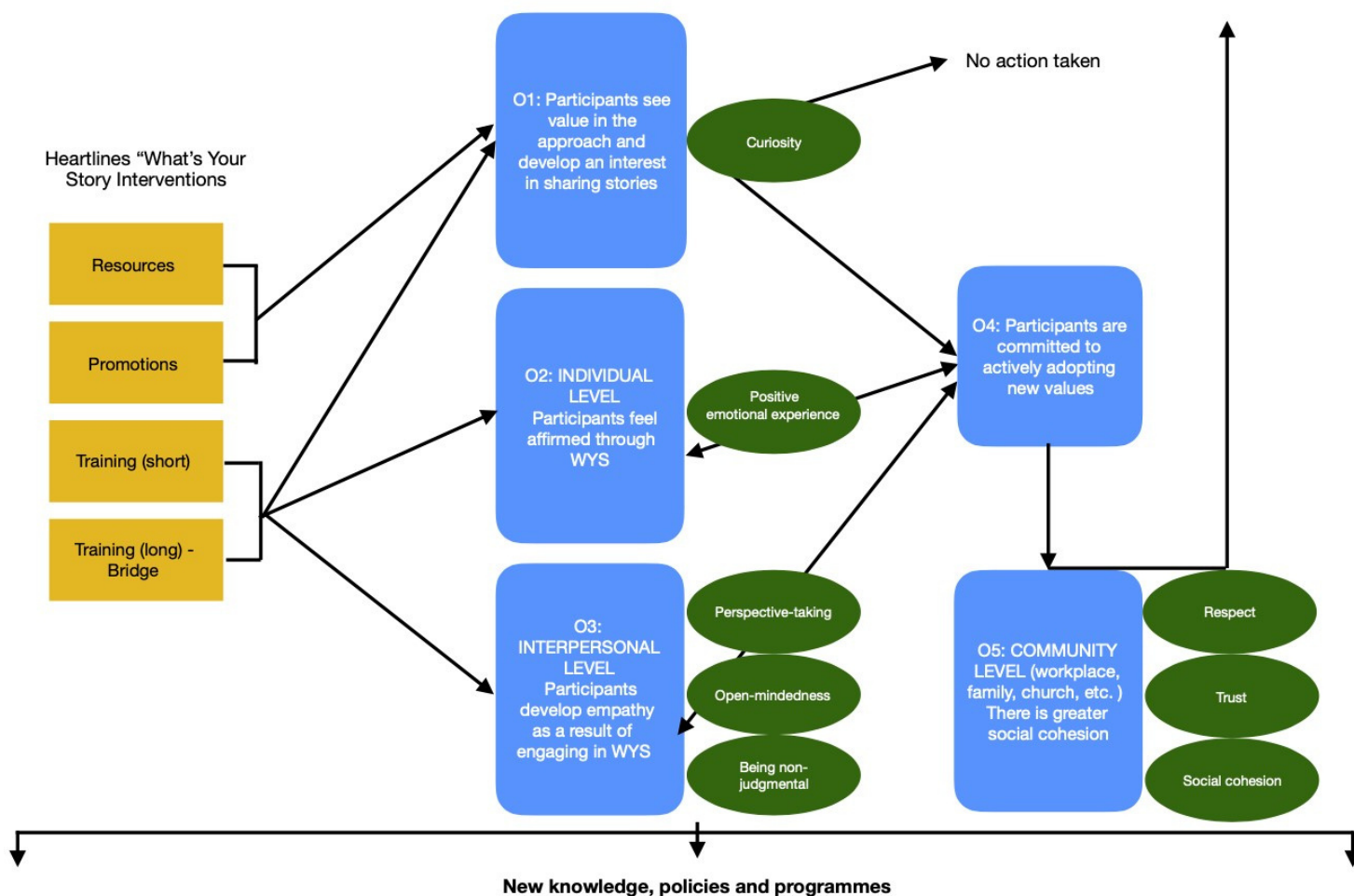


FIGURE 1: OVERARCHING PROGRAMME THEORY

Key Findings

In the formative evaluation, church data from the retrospective baseline showed that after being exposed to WYS by Heartlines, 42% of respondents had engaged in further intentional storytelling with others. In the summative evaluation, a full 80% of respondents reported that they had engaged in further storytelling processes with others.

This increased likelihood of someone adopting the WYS approach amongst respondents that were introduced to WYS in the period after the formative evaluation can, in part, be explained by the issue of 'dosage': that is, the evaluation found that the more an individual was exposed to different WYS activities – such as having WYS explained to them, engaging in a story-sharing process with others when being introduced to WYS, watching Heartlines' *Beyond the River* film, or engaging in more intensive Bridge workshops to promote social cohesion – the more likely they were to adopt the methodology.



After these findings were shared in the formative evaluation, Heartlines endeavoured to ensure that individuals had access to an increased number of activities – a higher ‘dosage’ – that would result in more individuals adopting the approach.

Workplace data were only collected during the formative evaluation of WYS. Of these workplace respondents, 48,5% reported that they had gone on to adopt the WYS approach. A review of these findings showed that the issue of ‘dosage’ was also an important factor in determining who chose to adopt the WYS methodology. Again, where individuals had greater levels of exposure to WYS activities, they were more likely to adopt the WYS methodology.



Adopting WYS

Reasons for taking up WYS included wanting to improve relationships between people in an organisation (23% of church respondents and 29% of workplace respondents); breaking down barriers between people (23% of church respondents and 18% of workplace respondents); and learning more about others (11% of church respondents and 18% of workplace respondents).

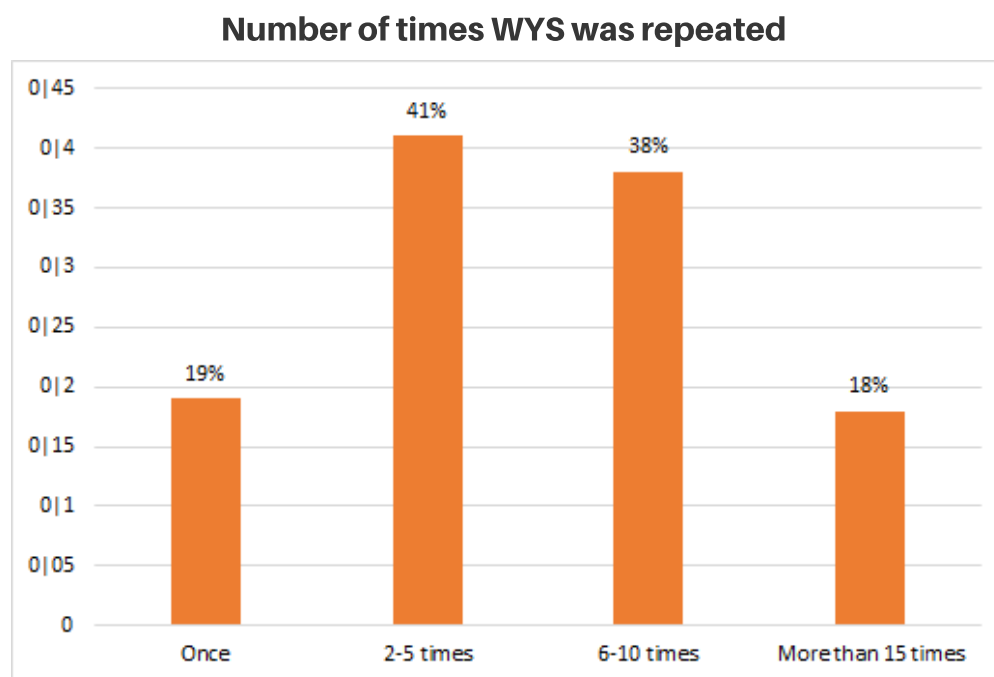


FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF TIMES WYS WAS REPEATED

Once individuals have adopted the WYS methodology, the evidence suggests that the vast majority repeat the methodology more than once and cascade this methodology into their homes, neighbourhoods, workplaces and communities.

Amongst church respondents, 81% repeated WYS more than once and, of those, 18% reported that they had repeated the process more than 15 times. Amongst workplace respondents, 100% reported that they had repeated WYS more than once, with 41% reporting that they had repeated the process more than 15 times. This speaks to the extent to which respondents valued WYS.

Perceived Value

The value of WYS was evidenced by a full 82% of respondents indicating that they believed WYS to be “a powerful tool that can be effectively used to change society”. One respondent commented that, “I could see the value in this process. The format was reassuring, and it brought humanity and valuing of people. We shared joys and challenges and shared genuine relationships.”

Another observed that initially they were “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 of Life [i.e., detailing one’s life path in a diagrammatic fashion that resembles a 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.”

Perception of the value of WYS

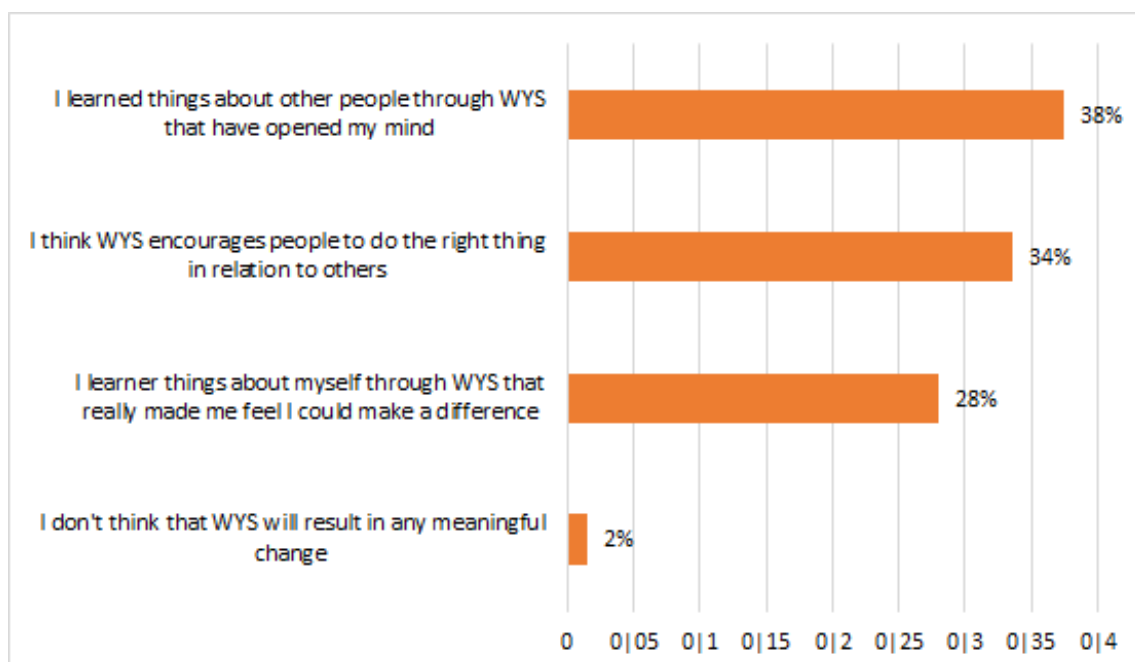


FIGURE 3: PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE OF WYS

Positive Changes

The findings also give strong evidence of positive changes as a result of being exposed to WYS. These were found at the level of the individual, within churches, workplaces or other organisations, and beyond these organisations into the wider communities.

At the start of the WYS programme, in consultation with empathy experts based in South Africa and Europe, values that represent a core component of empathy were identified. These values included curiosity, ability to be non-judgmental, appreciation of diversity, ability to see something from another person's perspective, understanding, feelings of connection with others, trust, communication and collaboration. Respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of personal changes in values.

In both the formative and summative evaluations respondents uniformly rated themselves higher on these values after having implemented WYS.



FIGURE 4: PERSONAL CHANGES IN VALUES 1

Personal changes in value 2

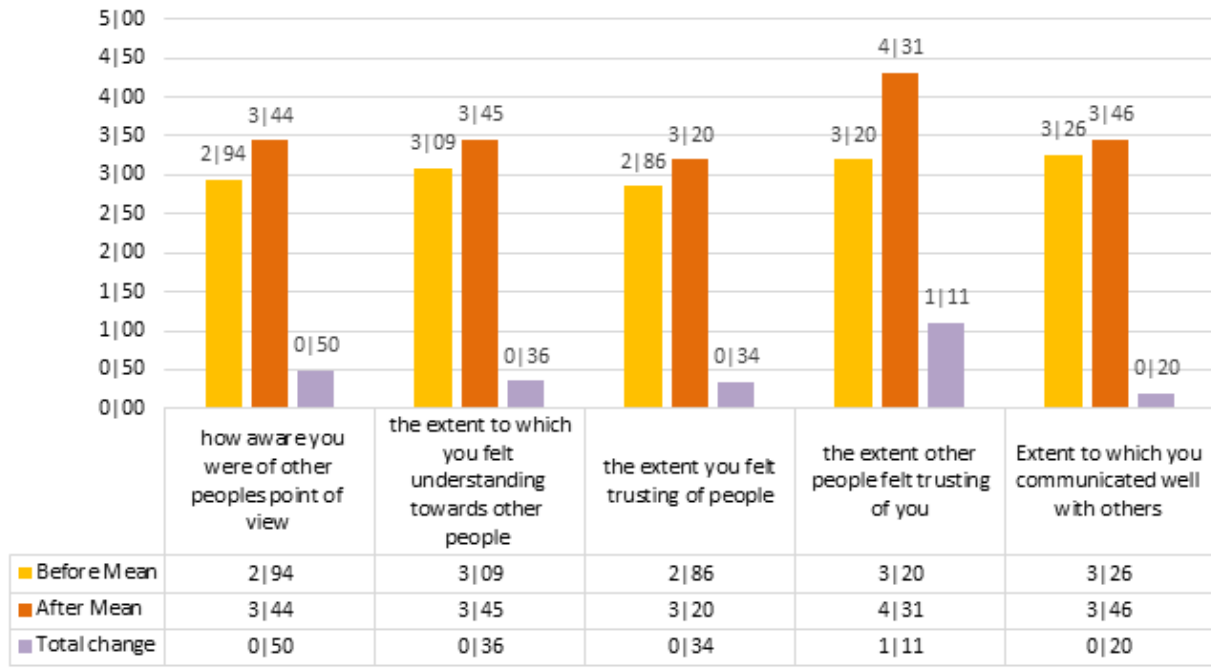


FIGURE 5: PERSONAL CHANGES IN VALUES 2

Personal changes in value 3

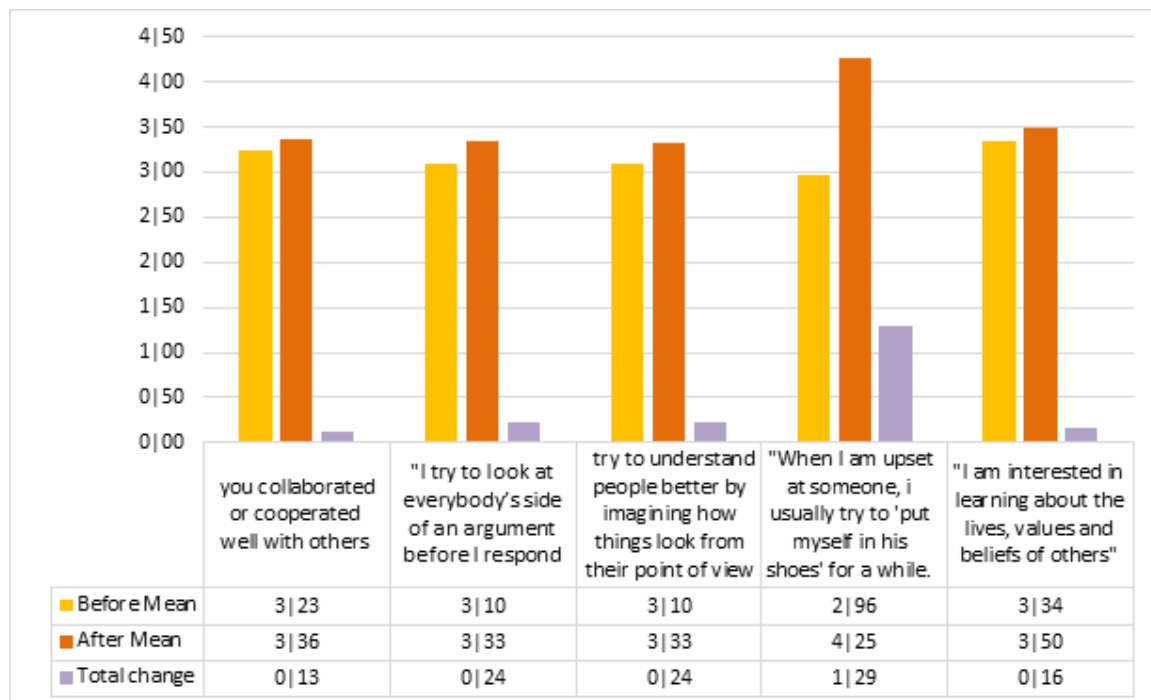



FIGURE 6: PERSONAL CHANGES IN VALUES 3

Respondents interviewed for the case studies described how the storytelling process supported greater levels of understanding that helped to resolve negative emotions and even improve relationships at work. Importantly, respondents spoke of the extent to which they had developed increased levels of empathy. Church members felt that WYS was an “eye-opener” in changing their perceptions about other people.

One respondent stated that “I have now learned how to open up and talk about myself” and another observed that what they had learned was 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.”



“I have now learned how to open up and talk about myself.”

Respondents also spoke of positive changes within their congregations and workplaces as a result of WYS. In the WYS case studies in churches, respondents reported a deepening of relationships and even better attendance at church. One respondent observed that, “The WYS experience has produced obvious changes in the [church] 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.”

Similarly, workplace respondents reported greater levels of cooperation and connectedness and indicated that this was underpinned by increased levels of communication and trust, which are considered central to strengthening teamwork and building new forms of relationships in the workplace.

In terms of the wider community, data from the church case studies indicated that both church leaders and church members believed that WYS contributed towards their churches having a more outward focus and caring about and contributing to others. In other cases, 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.”

Respondents spoke about the extent to which WYS contributed to churches building relationships with other churches in their communities. This sometimes involved bringing churches with different dominant racial demographics closer together. There were also examples of churches cooperating with each other better in their immediate surrounds.

A respondent explained that in their community there was an ‘adopt a pastor’ programme, where pastors visited one another to get know each other better and share ideas to improve their church services. The programme was implemented to help leaders from different churches better engage with one another.

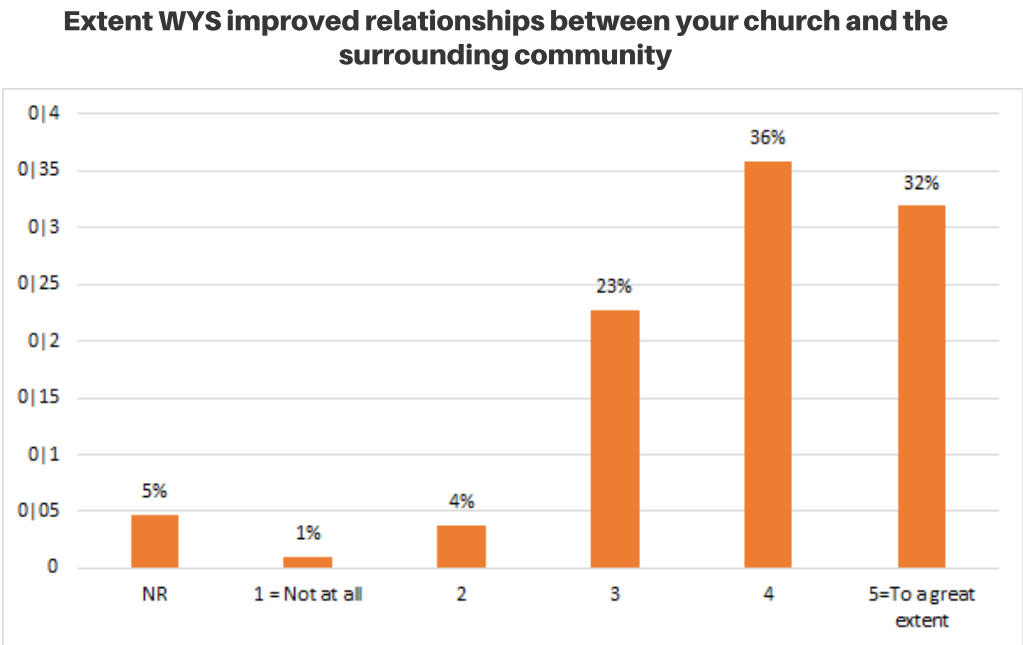


FIGURE 7: WYS AND RELATIONSHIP WITH COMMUNITY

The respondent indicated, however, that people were often reticent to engage with pastors that they did not know. However, when WYS was integrated into the programme, it reportedly resolved these issues as leaders from different churches were able to build rapport through the sharing of stories.

The evaluation found that key factors that promote change included: the simplicity and accessibility of the approach; having a WYS champion who believed in the method and was passionate about making a difference; more experience in sharing over time increasing ease and comfort; and being able to access the range of resources that Heartlines has made available.

Some hindering factors included the complexity of the change journey and the iterative nature of change; not being experientially exposed to a story-sharing process at the point of introduction to WYS (this is linked to the issue of dosage mentioned previously); discomfort with sharing on the part of some individuals; lack of access to resources (or knowledge of these); and concern about how to respond to some of the revelations made in the course of story-sharing.

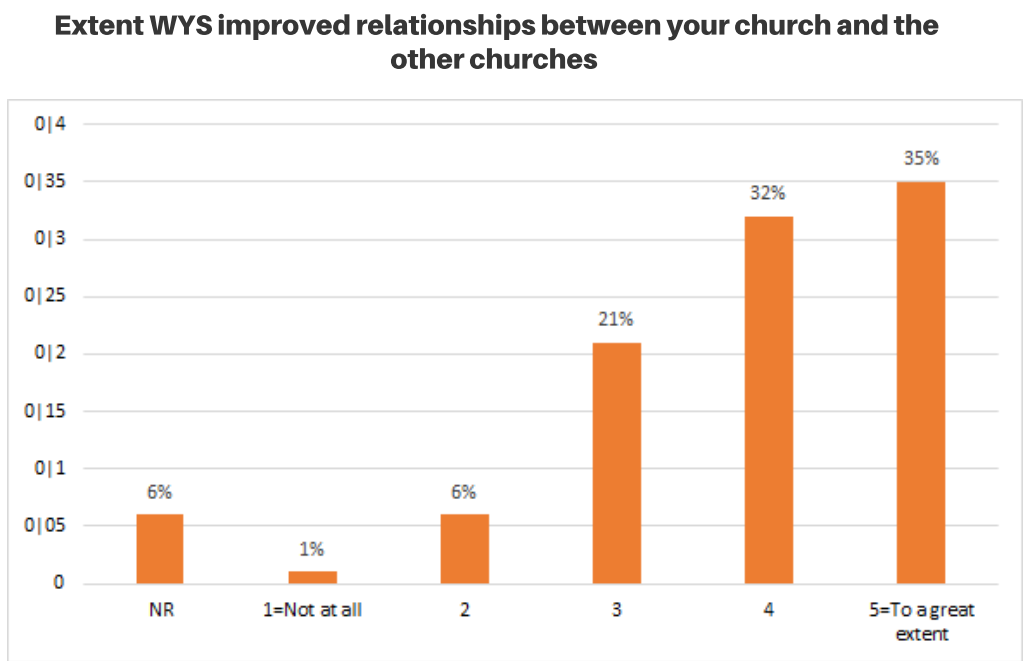


FIGURE 8: WYS AND RELATIONSHIP ACROSS CHURCHES

Conclusion

These findings suggest that WYS is successful in promoting change and that it is a simple and accessible approach. It is an easy-to-use tool that can be implemented without additional guides and resources. The more people share, the easier it gets for others to take the process forward and integrate it into daily conversations and situations in ways that promote increased levels of connectedness and contribute to cohesion.



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