WorldView change through community groups in delhi

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Transformative Power of Conversations

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**A Special Thanks…**

*I would like to extend a special thank you to the Delhi House Society staff. I have had the privilege of working alongside you and learning from you over the past year and a half. You have taught me so much about what it means to love and serve people in the name of Jesus.*

*This research would not have been possible without you.*



# **Abstract**

By ignoring the spiritual elements of poverty, development workers often overlook the spiritual roots of human problems. They overlook integral worldview elements that prevent progress. A person’s worldview influences belief, motivation, and action. By addressing elements of worldview that hinder progress, development agencies will be more likely see true and lasting transformation occur in communities.

This paper proposes that community conversation is one way to address elements of worldviews that prevent progress in the community development process. Conversations open doors to discuss the deeper worldview issues behind community problems, and creates an environment of critical thinking that allows people to be exposed to new ideas. Conversation also puts development back in the hands of the people and empowers them to be the change agents in their own communities.

Based on case studies in the Delhi context, this research seeks to find holistic and conversational approaches to community development which integrates spiritual transformation and practical empowerment, with potential for lasting change in communities.

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# **Chapter 1**

# **Introduction to the Issue**

Best practices have been a topic of much discussion in the development community in recent years. Popular buzz words in this discussion include “holistic,” “participatory,” and “sustainable.” Development agencies realize the importance of involving the people in the development process, but there is still much discussion about the best approach to take in this endeavor. This begs the question: What is the best way to transform communities and ensure that this transformation will last?

In various conversations with the staff of an NGO called Delhi House Society (DHS), the issue of true and lasting transformation has come up many times. In order to see sustainable change, the staff believes there needs to be an inward (and, more specifically, spiritual) transformation of mind and heart. A desire and decision to change must first come from among the people if development programs are going to be effective in communities long-term. Essentially, a change needs to occur at the worldview level. For those living with addictive behaviors, drowning in fatalism, or living a life of dependence on NGO or government aid, true transformation will not come unless this happens.

This organization referred to the transformative power of Jesus. I was interested in learning more about how to bring about community transformation through the transformative power of Jesus, so I decided to investigate how different organizations in Delhi are attempting this. One development program that I found to be particularly intriguing was one of Delhi House Society’s own – a men’s rehabilitation center called Sewa Ashram. At Sewa Ashram, they have community support groups called Life Groups. These groups use a conversational format to address worldview issues that hinder progress in the recovery process and provide the men with the social support necessary to make positive behavior changes.

Inspired by Sewa Ashram’s Life Groups, I chose to specifically seek out organizations in Delhi that were using a conversation-based development approach within a community group setting. In this research, I have explored the role that conversation plays in worldview change, and how this process can bring about lifestyle transformation. Along with conversation, I have also attempted to identify any other community group dynamics that promote worldview change and ultimately lead to behavior change and improved well-being.

## **Research Hypothesis**

Based on my previous knowledge of faith and faith movements, I approached this research with the presupposition that inner worldview change must occur in order for true outward lifestyle transformation to take place. However, I wanted to uncover what role conversations can play in this transformative process. Therefore, I asked the following question:

* **What impact do conversations in a community group setting in Delhi, India have in promoting worldview change and lifestyle transformation?**

I believe that **conversations\*** have the ability to cultivate critical thinking, through which personal or community issues can be thought through and addressed. When paired with teaching based on biblical principles or stories, I propose that this dialectical process provides a space for transformational conversations about Jesus to occur. These conversations have the potential to promote **worldview change\*\*** and **lifestyle transformation\*\*\***.

### **Clarification of Terms**

**\*Conversation:** In the context of the community groups in this study, conversation refers to the group discussion. The term “conversation” comes from Dr. Viv Grigg’s concept of *transformational* *conversations*. These conversations open a holistically-focused dialogue, which seeks to address both temporal issues and the spiritual roots that are often behind these issues. The goal of this dialogue is to produce collective and transformative action in the community (Grigg, 2009, p. 21-22, 25).

**\*\*Worldview Change:** A paradigm shift occurs which changes the way a person thinks, and causes him or her to view reality from a new perspective. Previous assumptions are often challenged or even replaced with new ones during this process. In this study, I use this term to refer to a change in a person’s inner motivations or values. In my research, I specifically looked for spiritual transformation that occurred through this process.

**\*\*\*Lifestyle Transformation:** This is behavior change that occurs as a result of worldview change. Inward spiritual change leads to holistic change of the individual and how they interact with the world.

## **Assumptions and Presuppositions**

When formulating my research plan, I went forward with the assumption that there are community groups in Delhi which are using conversations or some form of discussion in their group meetings. Based off of the prior knowledge I had about Sewa Ashram’s Life Groups, I felt that worldview change was a probable outcome of conversation-based community development interventions. As my research hypothesis states, a change in thinking is more likely to result in a change in action.

I have also approached this research from the perspective of a biblical worldview, which brings with it certain theological presuppositions and bias. As a Christian, I am in agreement with the folks at Sewa Ashram in an understanding that the transformative power of Jesus to bring holistic healing and restoration to both individuals and communities. This has influenced my understanding of what is needed for holistic transformation – specifically my belief that spiritual transformation holds the key to transformation in all other areas of life. This has allowed access, and likely not biased the study as the research is more linked to process rather than justification of the belief system.

## **Relevance to Service Provision**

More and more, development agencies are using participatory approaches in the community development process. Some of the most common practices that I have heard of being used in communities in Delhi are Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD).

Although there has been some increase in participatory development approaches in recent years, there are still quite a few NGOs that simply provide services, giving little to no thought to the need for a change in mind and heart. They do not address the root problems behind behavior patterns and larger systems that often keep people in poverty. Many development approaches do not include the people in the decision-making process of development. These kinds of approaches may view the poor as incapable of bringing themselves out of poverty, and see financial deficit as the defining issue keeping people in poverty rather than the spiritual and social issues that often lead to poverty.

What I am proposing, a conversation-based model of community development, includes many of the same elements of ABCD method but goes even further than that to get to the level of values, which influences spiritual and emotional dynamics. In a community group setting, the true nature and root causes of a community problem can be discussed, and solutions about how to address these problems are collectively sought. When an environment of critical thinking is cultivated, it fosters creativity and openness to new ideas. During this kind of dialectical process, people are often confronted with personal issues or circumstances in their own lives that may be preventing transformation for themselves and their loved ones from occurring. All of these elements have the potential to bring about deep worldview change.

Narrow perspectives and compartmentalization of societal issues have prevented more people from taking a holistic and integrated approach to development. In many Indian Christian churches, there still seems to be more emphasis on living a “good life” and correcting wrong behavior. This is not to say that Indian Christians do not believe that this inward transformation needs to take place. However, in a shame-based culture, the first thing that people address is often the action itself, not the heart or reasoning behind the behavior. There seem to be very few church-led programs that approach poverty in a relational and holistic way. Many fail to address the spiritual and temporal issues behind poverty in an integrated fashion.

## **Theological Framework**

Grigg’s concept of Transformational Conversations is essentially the model that I have set out to find in this research. The transformational conversation approach allows a bridge to be built into a theological conversation in the process of addressing temporal city issues, as shown in Figure 1. It is a process which encourages people to talk about an issue, identify root problems, collaborate in order to determine creative solutions, and eventually take action to bring about change in their own communities. These conversations are a holistically-focused dialectical process, addressing temporal issues while also addressing the spiritual root to human problems. The goal is to dialogue in order to collectively arrive at a holistic solution to a problem and produce transformative action (2009, pp. 21-22).

Figure 1: Transformational Conversation Cycle



*Figure 1 demonstrates the Transformational Conversation Cycle. It begins with an Entrance Story (a story of faith in action which identifies biblical urban themes) that relates to the current City Conversation (a conversation in which issues affecting a community are identified and discussed). This provides an opportunity for a Theological Conversation (a discussion about faith and the nature of God) and eventually leads to an interface Transformational Conversation (the interface of the God conversation and the city conversation). The intended outcome of a Transformational Conversation is Active Engagement (faith-informed action for social change).*

Using the transformational conversation model, I will formulate a small group framework that includes discussion as a major component of the community development process. This will be created in partnership with the Delhi House Society staff after the completion of this study. I will also include any other small group dynamics that respondents identify as effective elements in producing worldview change and lifestyle transformation. This community group format will be implemented by Delhi House Society (and eventually others) and applied to their current small group program. There is an evident need for a transformational conversation approach to development.

This dialectical process is a way for the people to be empowered and secure a voice in their own destiny. Working alongside the poor and allowing them the freedom and agency to change their own communities is right and just. Affirming that the poor have the ability to improve their own lives also affirms biblical principles of the dignity and worth of all people in the eyes of God.

**Variables**

Figure 2: Variables

The independent variables in this study would be conversation (and other applicable group dynamics), as they are the elements which will be influencing the dependent variables, worldview change and lifestyle transformation (see Figure 2). In accordance with the research hypothesis, worldview change will be directly influenced by conversations, and lifestyle transformation will be indirectly influenced by conversation, occurring as a secondary outcome after worldview change takes place.

*Figure 2 identifies the independent and dependent variables in this study. The Independent Variable, conversation, is what was proposed to influence the state of the Dependent Variables, worldview change and lifestyle transformation. Worldview change will be directly influenced by conversations, and lifestyle transformation will be indirectly influenced by conversation, occurring as a secondary outcome after worldview change takes place.*

The diagram in Figure 3 below demonstrates how these variables fit into the process of transformation that was suggested in my research hypothesis. In my primary data collection, I was specifically looking for evidence that worldview change and lifestyle transformation occur as a result of transformational conversations taking place in a community group setting.

*Figure 3 details the Process of Transformation proposed in the research hypothesis. Based on Grigg’s Transformational Conversation Cycle, my hypothesis suggests that Community Group Conversations about social and economic issues have the potential to include conversations about spirituality. The interface of these two conversations produces a Transformational Conversation, which fosters an environment of critical thinking and community collaboration. The expected outcome of this Transformational Conversation is worldview change, which then leads to holistic lifestyle transformation.*

Figure 3: The Process of Transformation

**Measurable indicators of individual worldview change** may include: change of belief system or religious identity, change in religious practices (whether frequency or type of practices performed), and change in self-esteem level or self-concept.

**Measurable indicators of lifestyle transformation** may include: changes in well-being - i.e., health or healthcare practices, educational attainment, ceasing to engage in destructive behaviors (drug or alcohol addiction, violence, etc.), family or other relational dynamics (as indicated by relational restoration and harmony), and increased social or civic engagement.

I also looked for additional outcomes which are not easily measured in the process of developing case studies. When important, this additional information has been included in its respective case study in the form of thick description (Gray, 2014, loc. 4893).

## **Population and Sites**

In the primary research phase, I conducted **observations and interviews** in **five community groups** with organizations in different areas of Delhi. While visiting each group, I conducted interviews with the facilitators and two to four participants from each group. Participants were from **a variety of different socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds.**

Contact with potential participants was obtained through pre-existing relational and professional networks with other NGOs and development workers in Delhi. I specifically sought out community groups and organizations that were led by Christians and focused on addressing social or economic issues in the community. In order to see how versatile conversation is as a development tool, I chose to visit organizations that seek to address a variety of different social and economic issues, including addiction recovery, adult education, financial management, and women’s empowerment.

Because relational connections are so important in Indian culture, making contact through people who already have established professional relationships is an important first step in establishing trust and rapport with potential participants. Initial contact with potential participants was made through various intermediary professional contacts in Delhi. The researcher provided these intermediary contacts with a brief description of the research that could be used as a verbal invitation to participate in the study. These intermediary contacts then offered to connect potential participants with me if they are interested in participating in the study.

Interviews and participant observations occurred at the locations where each community group regularly meets. This ensured that the research participants would be in an environment which they found familiar and comfortable. However, if a female interviewee felt uncomfortable being interviewed in this common space, the interview was conducted in a more private setting of her choice. Interviews with male participants were always done in a public space for the purpose of conducting the interview in a culturally appropriate manner.

# **Chapter 2**

# **A Review of the Literature**

Throughout the history of the field of development, the discussion of best practices and approaches has been ongoing: What is the best way to promote social change and economic uplift? What is needed to see sustainable and long-lasting transformation occur? What role does each stakeholder play in this process? What role do religion and culture play in this process? There are certainly a myriad of different development models that have been implemented over the years, and some have arguably been more effective than others. Participatory models of development have become increasingly more popular in recent years due to their sustainability and effectiveness. The literature provides evidence for a participatory and conversational approach to community development, and shows how faith and worldview are at the center of it all.

## **The Importance of Christian Community Development**

Woolnough (2014) suggests that development is best done through the local church rather than an international development agency. He calls the local church “God’s chosen instrument for meeting the needs of the local community” (p. 3). The structure of the Church has the benefit of what Woolnough calls the “amplification factor,” in that it has an abundance of relational network connections at its disposal to accomplish great tasks. Because caring for the poor is one of the core missions of the Church, there will always be volunteers to assist in the development process. Many have noted that Christian NGOs are of better quality in terms of the services and commitment they have to their communities for this reason. Their work is motivated by love, and is an outworking of their worship to God. Unlike development agencies that come and go, the Church is a fixed social structure in the community, which ultimately makes it a more sustainable institution (Woolnough, 2014, pp. 3-5).

Although he sees the central role of Christians in development work, Woolnough also acknowledges the importance of partnership between Christian NGOs and secular organizations. Larger secular development agencies, such as the UN and the World Bank, often have access to funds that smaller faith-based organizations do not. However, Christian approaches to development tend to be more holistically focused, recognizing the need to address both material and spiritual poverty in order to see true transformation occur. Many of these approaches that look at spiritual roots to poverty focus on seeing a change in behavior rather than simply providing material goods and services (Woolnough, 2014, pp. 7-9).

When doing development in a community, it is absolutely essential to address the spiritual roots of human problems. It is still common to find churches and Christian NGOs who either focus only on caring for souls, or only care for a people’s temporal needs. However, the two must be integrated into a holistic development approach. When seeking to meet a community’s material needs, it is necessary to simultaneously address deep-rooted worldview issues in order to see long-term transformation result.

## **Addressing Worldview**

The term “transformation” is used by both Christian and secular community development scholars to describe a noticeable change in the outward lifestyle practices and standard of living in a community. However, in Christian community development circles, transformation specifically refers to a holistic change from the inside out. Improved well-being is firstly a spiritual transformation, which then results in an outward lifestyle transformation. Spiritual transformation is rooted in worldview change.

### **Worldview: Why Start Here?**

Kraft (1987) defines worldview as, “the central systemization of the conceptions of reality to which the members of the culture assent (largely unconsciously) and from which stems their value systems. The worldview lies at the very heart of culture, touching, interacting with, and strongly influencing every other aspect of the culture” (p. 53). It is a people’s basic model of reality, the cultural structure that both organizes ideological concepts or patterns and governs the application of those concepts in behavior. It informs a person’s understanding of the cosmos, and how he or she is to live as a part of it.

Worldview has five basic functions:

* **Explanation** – Worldview explains how and why reality operates the way it does. It informs a person’s basic assumptions about how the universe and spiritual realm function.
* **Evaluation** – A person’s values, ethics, and goals are rooted in worldview. These fundamental beliefs are what guide everyday decision-making, and influence a culture’s institutions and systems.
* **Psychological Reinforcement** – Worldview guides a people’s rituals, ceremonies, and other cultural practices, especially those related to major life events.
* **Integration** – Worldview provides an overall structure and design of culture for how to operate within a given belief system. This influences behavior and social roles, and determines how a person interacts with society.
* **Adaptation** – Culture changes conservatively over time in order to resolve conflict and reduce cultural dissonance. A person’s worldview is constantly changing in response to the constant changes taking place on the surface level of culture. This is a normal occurrence.

[Kraft, 1987, pp. 54-57]

Mittwede (2013) proposes that if a person’s current belief system does not adequately answer the ultimate questions of life, they will become restless and seek out a belief system that does. This restlessness often results in paradigm shifts. Unlike normal, surface-level worldview adjustments, paradigm shifts impact deep level culture. Kraft says, “People cannot live without values and when the old values are called into question they will bend every effort to discover new values and to integrate them into a new, more satisfying worldview” (1987, p. 368). This can either happen through a complete replacement of an existing cognitive framework or through the modification of the existing worldview (Mittwede, 2013, pp. 303-304).

Hiebert (2008) uses the metaphor of a house when describing worldview change. Normal worldview changes are like remodeling and adding to a structure that already exists. The majority of a person’s worldview remains intact, but small changes are made in order to make sense of new information and experiences. However, when a paradigm shift occurs, it is “like rebuilding a house using parts and pieces of the old, but with a radically new way of ordering the fundamental configuration” (p. 317).

Mittwede, who looks at the process of worldview change through a lens of educational theory, examines what role theological education plays in this transformational process. Two educational theories can be applied to worldview change: Ausubel’s subsumption theory and Anderson’s schema theory. Subsumption theory proposes that new ideas are incorporated into an existing cognitive structure, adding to and supporting previous knowledge. Previous knowledge in a person’s cognitive structure allows them to learn and retain knowledge about unfamiliar concepts. Schema theory, on the other hand, proposes that new schemas (structures of knowledge) are created to house new ideas. However transformation may occur, it is a learning process. It is never instantaneous (pp. 308-312).

When building a new worldview, it is important to keep in mind a person’s current or previous worldview. This is the lens of understanding through which they interpret and understand new knowledge (pp. 302-304). The core of a person’s worldview may have changed, but this new worldview will still be influenced by a person’s past knowledge and experiences. Therefore, when seeking to promote worldview change among a community, it is necessary to understand how they currently see the world and how these perceptions will impact newly-acquired beliefs (Hiebert, 2008, p. 69). This is precisely why Mittwede says, “Thus, understanding an individual’s base-level commitments is essential to understanding that person’s reasoning, decision-making, and lifestyle, and to influencing replacement of...or adjustments to those commitments which, in turn, lead to changes in the daily life of the individual” (2013, pp. 303-304).

### **The Process Leading to Worldview Change and Lifestyle Transformation**

Worldview transformation does not generally occur without an introduction to new knowledge and exposure to other worldviews. However, a change in worldview does not come through an increase in knowledge (and specifically, biblical knowledge) alone. This newly acquired knowledge must influence a person’s daily life, and transform the way they live and interact with the world. Transformation, which is informed by new knowledge and skills, is a change in one’s whole self (Kraft, 1987, pp. 72-80). The faith of a transformed person is marked not only by intellectual knowledge of orthodoxy (right belief), but also by the emotional and practical expressions of orthopraxy (right practice). Both are evident in the life of a transformed person (Mittwede, p. 304).

Spiritual transformation involves change in all three areas of culture – cognitive (beliefs – head knowledge), affective (feelings – heart and relationship with God), and evaluative (norms – lifestyle and decision-making) (Hiebert, pp. 25-26, 312). Decision-making is one of the most important elements of the transformational process, as it is the commitment to act that bring about change in a community. Kraft identifies seven milestones in a basic model of the decision-making process:

1. **Stimulus**
2. **Awareness**
3. **Realization**
4. **Consideration**
5. **Decision**
6. **Incorporation**
7. **New Habit**

[Kraft, 1987, p. 336]

This is the basic process behind how worldview change, and eventually lifestyle transformation, occurs. This evaluative transformation is what leads us to social and just action. It is the outworking of faith, a reflection of the inward transformation that has already taken place. Hiebert says,

We need to return to a biblical view of transformation, which is both a point and a process…It is not simply mental assent to a set of metaphysical beliefs, nor is it solely a positive feeling toward God. Rather it involves entering a life of discipleship and obedience in every area of our being and throughout the whole story of our lives (2008, p. 310).

In the Christian understanding of the process of spiritual transformation, there are various steps that take place. Justification happens at the time a faith decision is made, but the process of sanctification takes place over time. Worldview change occurs in much the same way. There is a point when people make a conscious decision to believe something, but seeing this belief impact a person’s daily life happens over time as he or she learns what it means to live out this new belief practically (Mittwede, pp. 308, 319-320).

### **Worldview Change and the Community Development Process**

Because worldview is both a model of reality (describing and explaining the nature of the world) and a model for action (a framework for guiding a person’s behavior), it is important to address it in the community development process. Many times, Western models of development set up compartmentalized programs that only address one area of life at a time. However, the majority of the two-thirds world views life in a more integrated and holistic manner. It is understood that the material world and the spiritual world regularly interact (Hiebert, 2008, p. 28).

Cultures and communities are complex entities which require contextual understanding. There are often deeply-rooted cultural, social, and spiritual elements of a society which hinder progress, but may not be immediately recognized as such by outsiders. Common situations which hinder healthy decision-making, and ultimately transformation, from occurring include:

* **Lack of awareness:** Those experiencing the issue may not recognize it as a problem. This is often a result of cultural norms that have existed for generations.
* **Powerlessness of fatalism:** A problem may be recognized but is seen as natural (biological) rather than learned (cultural), and therefore difficult or impossible to change.
* **Disagreement about approaching change:** The problem and the possibility of a solution are both recognized, but the method by which to go about seeking change is disagreed upon by those experiencing the problem.

[Kraft, 1987 p. 354]

Development programs and services must be delivered in a way that makes sense to the recipients, and includes them in the process. They must fit into the receptor’s framework of cultural understanding in order to be understood and accepted. This is especially true when it comes to communicating new information in the development process. Communication is most effective when:

* New information comes to people through their own discovery rather than an outsider telling them, or,
* Receptors of the message can identify with the communicator.

Worldview change is more likely to occur if the basic premises of the receptor culture are similar to those of the outsider’s worldview (Kraft, 1987, p. 163). A participatory and communication-based model of development is essential for worldview change and lifestyle transformation to occur.

Using a discussion-based process of mutual learning encourages participants to apply cognitive knowledge to their own lives, shifting the emphasis from a purely cognitive experience to a practical and personalized one (Mittwede, 2013, p. 308309). By gaining deeper knowledge about themselves and each other through personal experience, their worldviews are transformed. Conversation is the key in this process.

## **The Power of Conversations: Conversations Applied to Holistic Community Interventions**

One of the best ways to identify and address worldview issues is through conversation. However, the purpose of incorporating conversations into the community development process is not simply to analyze and talk about issues, but to eventually produce critical action that leads to transformation (Holland & Henriot, 1983, p. 7). Therefore, finding communication strategies that are participatory and promote positive decision making, while remaining appropriate for the cultural setting, is vital. What is needed is what Grigg calls *transformational conversations* (2009, p. 22).

### **Transformational Conversations**

The transformational conversation approach allows a bridge to be built into a theological conversation (one that grapples with the spiritual issues of the situation) in the process of addressing temporal city issues. It is a process which encourages people to discuss community issues, identify root problems, work together to develop creative solutions to these problems, and eventually take action to bring about change in their own communities. This holistically-focused dialectical process addresses social and economic issues while also dealing with the spiritual root to human problems. The ultimate goal of this dialogue is for community members to collectively arrive at a holistic solution to a problem and produce transformative action (Grigg, 2009, pp. 21-22).

Grigg, who coined the term *transformational conversations*, sees communal conversations as one of the defining principles of urban theology in the global world. The transformational conversation interpretation and application of urban theology defines “conversation spaces” as public space for open communication about complex city issues. Communal conversations are a simple and inclusive way to approach social transformation. Even those with limited education and experience with the community development process can participate by simply sharing their stories (pp. 21-22, 25).

Storytelling, a powerful tool among the two-thirds world poor, is an integral part of this conversation process. In most band, tribal, or peasant societies (such as those in India), culture and community life are story-based, and people discern truth in a holistic way. Stories of faith in action are the entry point into the transformational conversation process. These stories may be in the form of oral storytelling, drama, song, or dance. These stories lead to an interface of urban issues and the Scriptures, which, through a community conversation, produces faith-informed action in the city (Grigg, pp. 23-30).

The idea of a “circle of praxis” is central to a conversationally-focused group format, as it emphasizes the ongoing relationship between reflection and action. Holland and Henriot (1983) identify four steps in the social analysis process:

* **Insertion:** Approaching social issues in a way that corresponds with the experiences of ordinary people.
* **Social Analysis:** Examining all elements of a social issue in light of the context of a given situation.
* **Theological Reflection:** Applying Scripture to the context in order to provide new insights, raise new questions, and open new responses.
* **Pastoral Planning:** Designing a holistic plan of action that integrates contextual realities and scriptural truth.

This process is more akin to a spiral than a circle, breaking new ground with each cycle rather than simply retracing old steps (Holland & Henriot, 1983, pp. 7-9).

Similarly, David C. Ward’s (2014) Christian interdisciplinary approach to social research, “faith-learning integration for social change,” incorporates a mix of concepts and questions into the learning process in pursuit of truth. This process of inquiry creates an environment in which dialogue about shared humanity and common challenges in the social and natural realms in a way that opens problem-solving opportunities that are informed by spiritual truths. Worldview analysis is a critical part of this. In this process, change in thinking first takes place at the individual level and then at the local community level (Ward, 2014, pp. 33-51).

## **Current Conversation-Based Models**

Communication-based approaches to development have become increasingly more accepted over the past thirty years. Communication for social change has its roots in Paulo Freire’s theory of communication as a dialectical and participatory process. It is a cyclical process rather than a linear one, and is relationally-led rather than organizationally-led. This cycle of dialogue and collective action is an ongoing process (Figueroa et al, 2014, pp. 2-3). Below are three examples of this dialectical process in action. Although not all of them are faith-based approaches, they each demonstrate elements which use conversation to promote worldview change and lifestyle transformation.

### **The Integrated Model of Communication for Social Change (IMCFSC) – The Rockefeller Foundation**

Many development models have focused on behavior change of the individual. However, an individual-focused initiative is not effective in many situations. This approach does not address the external social and physical constraints that exist in every society, and may prevent an individual from changing their own lives. Collective action in social change is necessary. By taking a community-based dialogue approach, both individual and communal concerns can be addressed. Community-wide issues can only be improved if the majority of the population commits to taking action to address a problem (Figueroa et al, 2014, pp. 3, 5-6, 13).

The Rockefeller Foundation uses an inclusive and participatory model of social change in their development interventions. The Integrated Model of Communication for Social Change (IMCFSC) is a combination of community dialogue and collective action intended to produce social change. Communication for Social Change (CFSC) best takes place within a community setting. It is a process in which a group of people come together to define who they are, what they need and want, and how to reach the goals which they have collectively determined (p. 5-6).

Key elements of this model include:

* Sustainability of social change is more likely if the individuals and communities most affected own the process and content of communication.
* Communication for social change should be empowering, horizontal (versus top-down), give a voice to the previously unheard members of the community, and be biased towards local content and ownership.
* Communities should be the agents of their own change.
* Emphasis should shift from persuasion and the transmission of information from outside technical experts to dialogue, debate and negotiation on issues that resonate with members of the community.
* Emphasis on outcomes should go beyond individual behavior to social norms, policies, culture and the supporting environment.

[Figueroa et al, 2014, p. ii]

There are two elements needed in the Communication for Social Change process: a model of communication and a model of social change.

#### **A Model of Communication:**

The CFSC process uses existing community leaders to guide community members through dialogue, working within the existing social structure to bring about a contextual decision-making process. This process includes an agreement by community members to dialogue, share information, engage with mutual respect and understanding, and collaborate to produce collective action. The underlying assumption of the dialectical process is that all participants agree to listen and change, not just one of the parties involved (Figueroa et al, 2014, p. 5, 25).

Dialogue does not spontaneously happen in a community, as is often implied in much of the literature on the subject. It generally occurs as the result of a catalyst, some form of stimulus in the community which incites dialogue. This could either be an internal catalyst (such as the recent onset of an illness in a community) or an external catalyst (such as a mass media campaign or an NGO initiative). This is the process through which elements of society that were once considered “normal’ are identified as “problems.” This identification and outside-the-box thinking is what prompts a community to consider and discuss an issue in the first place (pp. 6-8).

After the stimulation of a catalyst occurs, the Rockefeller Foundation identifies ten steps that take place in the community dialogue process.

1. Recognition of a problem
2. Identification and involvement of leaders and stakeholders
3. Clarifications of perceptions
4. Expression of individual and shared interest
5. Vision of the future – Envisioning the ideal community and what they want their community to look like in the future
6. Assessment of current status
7. Setting objectives
8. Options for action
9. Consensus on action
10. Action plan – Timetable with specific goals to be accomplished

[Figueroa et al, 2014, pp. 8-9]

This basic process follows a similar progression to Kraft’s general decision-making process, mentioned in the previous section.

#### **A Model of Social Change:**

Movements of transformational change happen in a community when people have a felt need and have prepared themselves to effect the necessary changes in order to meet this need (Figueroa et al, 2014, pp. 16-19; Kraft, 1987, pp. 77-80). In this model, this is a result of the community dialogue and clearly specifies both social and individual outcomes. This is the process through which a plan of action is developed detailing how the collective action will take place.

### **Community Conversations – The United Nations Development Program (UNDP)**

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has found significant success in implementing a community conversations model in their HIV/AIDS and female empowerment development projects throughout the two-thirds world. The term “community conversation,” as it is used here, describes group discussions that are run by locals and guided by a trained facilitator with sufficient knowledge on the subject. Community conversations are held for the purpose of problem solving and collectively generating action. These conversations are conducted with the explicit intent of changing participants’ worldviews and conceptions of a situation, and what is possible in terms of how change can occur (Campbell et al, 2013, pp. 2-3).

Those who pioneered this conversation-based intervention believe that long-lasting change can only occur in a community when the following takes place:

* Leaders at all levels commit to addressing a community problem by taking personal and collective responsibility
* Beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values which fuel a problem are addressed and transformed
* Action is taken to address the underlying causes that perpetuate a problem

An intrinsic element of this process in the empowerment of communities to be able to assess community problems and take collective action to solve them (UNDP, 2004, p. 8).

A group’s ability to engage in critical thinking about local strengths and challenges, and develop strategies to address these challenges is central to achieving HIV competence in a community. Freire proposes that critical thinking is a key precondition for action. His concept of “transformative communication” encourages group members to identify community problems and examine life issues through discussion. Community dialogue provides a process through which people can be exposed to new information and begin to work through it in order to apply it to their own lives (Campbell et al, 2013, p. 2).

The community conversation approach is a social learning process which recognizes that people bring unique and valuable perspectives and knowledge to the development process. They have both the capacities and the interest to be involved in bringing about change in their own communities. These human qualities are validated, built upon, and strengthened through community conversations. However, this approach also acknowledges that people can be misinformed and hold false beliefs that can prevent them from progressing and attaining their true potential. In most cases, worldview change is necessary before transformation can occur (UNDP, 2004, p. 6).

Community conversations provide participants with new knowledge on a subject while still allowing the discussion and cooperative problem solving to be directed primarily by the people. Facilitators pose questions and thinking points about why specific social problems are the way they are, what is currently being done in the community to address these problems (whether successfully or not), and how these complex social issues might be resolved. They encourage the group to engage in discussion, emphasizing the importance of doing so with respect, honesty, and constructively with the goal of problem solving in mind. In this process, a facilitator does not offer advice but rather encourages the group members to share their pre-existing community understandings and strengths, analyze local problems, and develop concrete action plans together (Campbell et al, 2013, pp. 3, 6).

Facilitating dialogue and decision-making allows people to create their own solutions to the root causes of their problems. Participatory methods employed in community conversation interventions include storytelling, active listening, and strategic questioning. These methodologies allow participants to identify shared concerns, observe, reflect, ask questions, explore options, and make decisions together for change. This is seen as a continuous process of social learning and practice rather than a one-time project or event (UNDP, 2004, p. 6).

The UNDP has adopted this community conversation approach for their ongoing work in Africa, particularly when working with HIV/AIDS and gender issues. A case study of a conversation-based intervention in Zimbabwe showed that community conversations effectively contributed to increased HIV competence in the following ways:

1. Enabling participants to develop concrete and practical action plans to combat stigma and better support PLWHA [People living with HIV/AIDS]
2. Challenging participants to think creatively and take positive action with the encouragement of facilitators
3. Working towards a common goal and being able to discuss taboo subjects
4. Encouraging participants to move from seeing themselves as passive recipients of HIV-related information to active problem solvers
5. Providing an opportunity for participants to conceive of ways to move from information to action.

[Campbell et al, 2013, p. 6]

Hindrances that prevented conversations from being more effective included poverty, poor harvests, and political upheaval.

The community conversation approach is a fairly new and distinct intervention that has gained popularity in the development world in recent years. Although the UNDP has used this model has primarily been used to address HIV/AIDS and gender issues, it would seem that these basic principles could be applied to a number of community social issues. However, Campbell acknowledges that there have been very few peer-reviewed articles detailing the actual methodology of this intervention, and the majority of literature that does exist is based on case studies in North America rather that among the resource poor of the two-thirds world. It would appear that there is a significant need for further research to be published on this subject (Campbell et al, 2013, p. 2-3).

### **Christian-Based Counselling (CBC) – Asian Theological Seminary**

Christian-based counselling (CBC) in the Philippines focuses on making the process of holistic healing as much of a community-led effort as possible by equipping local leaders to aid in the process. Support groups are organized so that people dealing with similar issues can provide each other with mutual support and even advice on practical coping skills. Conversation is used as a means of capacity building in a community, and can provide the participants with a sense of empowerment as they use their experience to help others. Empowerment-focused counselling allows the marginalized to not only develop a critical understanding of how issues impact their lives and work through these problems psychologically and emotionally. It also equips people to take critical action steps that might remedy these issues. These support group structures can naturally develop into collective action groups if they share a common ideology and/or purpose (Manzanilla-Manalo & Manalo, 2014, pp. 122-123).

CBC is based on an action research model, which builds a group’s capacity to generate knowledge about issues related to mental health issues and community resources that will allow them to address these issues. It is a process which builds on indigenous processes such as sharing stories, community dialogue, and learning with the community. This action research process can even include an advocacy-focused intervention strategy, which allows outsiders the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the community. Because the variety of activities that counselors are involved in is so broad, they also work closely with people in the fields of social work and community development in their community interventions (Manzanilla-Manalo & Manalo, 2014, pp. 123-124).

Charles Ringma (2008) says “transformation of one’s heart and re-orientation of values, motivation, attitudes and morals in and through Jesus Christ,” leads to “exterior liberation,” where one “invites God to reign in and transform society” (Manzanilla-Manalo & Manalo, 2014, p. 125). The CBC process is not just a set of strategies, but about building genuine relationships that bring spiritual healing and transformation. The values that guide this development process are the belief in the dignity and worth of all people, inclusivity, solidarity, equality, trust in people’s strengths and capacities, and “wholism.” It is about standing with the poor and marginalized in their struggles just as Jesus did. This is a witness to the character of God and His transformative power, which liberates humanity and creates order (Manzanilla-Manalo & Manalo, 2014, pp. 124-126).

## **Creating an Effective Movement of Change**

In order for social change and cultural transformation to be effective and sustainable, initial community development interventions must produce a movement. The process of transformation is both facilitated and speeded up when groups of people are actively involved rather than only individuals. A movement, according to Gerlach and Hine (1970) is “a group of people who are organized for, ideologically motivated by, and committed to a purpose which implements some form of personal or social change” (Kraft, 1987, p. 371). When communicating the Gospel and seeking transformation in group-oriented cultures, such as Hindu and Muslim communities in India, the following approaches have been found to be most effective in producing a successful movement.

### **Holistic Community Development**

Improvement in social and economic issues often naturally occur when the Gospel takes root in a community. However, conscious development measures should be attempted before spiritual transformation takes place, as this is a tangible way to exhibit the love of God. It is important to address both material and spiritual needs when communicating the Gospel. The marginalized in India have been oppressed and denied social justice for generations. Christian missionaries in India have been known to build schools, hospitals, and other facilities and opportunities along with the Gospel message.

Likewise, the Gospel must be communicated to Muslims and Hindus in a way that relates to everyday problems, and social concern must be properly balanced with evangelistic efforts (Ponraj, 1993, p. 118). Development workers and local group facilitators should seek change in a few critical areas of worldview rather than a larger number of peripheral or surface changes. It is important not to simply address specific behaviors or practices, but to seek the root causes of these. Change needs to begin by addressing a people’s understanding and commitment to God, and then change in behaviors and practices will follow. It is a matter of allegiance that influences most cultural traditions (Kraft, 1987, pp. 348-349, 366).

### **Community-Led and Relationally-Focused**

Personal friendship must be the basis for communication. Effective community transformation is community-led and relationally-focused rather than project-based or time-focused. Homogeneous societies may not automatically trust outsiders (whether foreign or simply from a different community) and relationship must be developed before any meaningful communication can take place (Nida, 1990, pp. 174-175). When available, conversation facilitators should be locals who are known and trusted by the community members in order for an open channel of communication to be established (Figueroa et al, 2014, p. 16).

It is important not to push people to make decisions before they are ready. Worldview and cultural behavior change are not an easy process. People need time to “reformulate their lives” (p. 366) and learn how to apply this worldview change to their daily lives (Kraft, 1987). Sufficient time must be allowed in order for new ideas to be considered and talked over with family and community members. This will reduce the risk of unnecessary social rejection of an individual from his or her community and keep relational ties with the community intact (Nida, 1990, pp. 178-179; Patterson & Scoggins, 1993, pp. 52-53).

Allowing time will also increase the likelihood of a new convert’s faith being a well-thought out decision rather than one that is based purely on situational emotion. Even small changes in individual worldviews should be seen as significant in the larger scheme of social change, as they have the potential to produce larger paradigm shifts over time (Campbell, 2014, p. 47). It is not uncommon for this decision to take years in the Muslim world (Nida, 1990, pp. 178-179; Patterson & Scoggins, 1993, pp. 52-53).

### **Working within Current Cultural and Hierarchical Structures – Group-Focused Decision Making**

Recognizing existing social structure and working within it is key to reaching those with decision-making power in a community. This includes working within specific ethnic or religious communities. Initial communication should be established with key people in the community (such as family heads or community leaders). These are often people with decision-making power who can communicate the Gospel message with some authority to those in their family or social networks. This approach is more likely to be accepted in a group-oriented society and is more likely to result in a people movement to Christ (Nida, 1990, pp. 177-181).

Indian communities tend to have a group consciousness. It is important to allow for group decision making to take place in the conversion process, as decisions about spiritual practices are usually intra-caste, community, and family matters. Individually-focused approaches for communicating the Gospel are irrelevant in a group-oriented culture and may even bring unnecessary opposition to the Gospel if it seems as though an individual is being isolated from his or her family (Ponraj, 1993, p. 108).

Multiplying groups of disciples rather than just individuals is both a logical and efficient approach to community transformation, especially in group-oriented cultures (Davis, 2012, p. 19). For this reason, it is important to focus on a specific people group or subculture. These are people who naturally live together and think alike. They will naturally grow together. Having worldview change occur in a group setting can provide a natural progression into meetings that talk primarily about spiritual truths and issues. It may morph into a Bible study or even a church plant eventually (Nida, 1990, pp. 175-181).

### **Incarnational and Contextual Evangelism**

Presence in a community leads to progress. When seeking to disciple members of a community, it is important to have a resident witness (Ponraj, 1993, p. 107). Meeting with people in their own space, such as in a community-group setting in someone’s house rather than a church or other building outside the community, is a way to prevent feelings of intimidation. It also gives agency, authority, and a sense of ownership to the community (Patterson & Scoggins, 1993, p. 49-52).

Campbell (2014) believes that one of the biggest problems with the widespread use of Freire’s dialectical approach in development efforts is that large development agencies have adopted these principles and have failed to use them properly. In cases like these, the dialectical development process is no longer community-led. These efforts may impose Western values on people through this process in an almost imperialist manner, and fail to recognize the larger social and political factors effecting an individual’s situation (pp. 50-51).

As mentioned above, it is ideal to work within existing family, culture, and societal structures where appropriate. Working with heads of households, when possible, can reach whole families in a way that is not threatening to the current relational structure (Patterson & Scoggins, 1993, p. 51-53). Group facilitators must understand the cultural systems and cognitive frameworks within a community in order to communicate new truths in a way that is understandable and fits into their current way of thinking. This can help them recognize cognitive, affective, or evaluative gaps in a worldview, and identify opportunities to introduce biblical truths (Mittwede, 2013, pp. 308-310).

### **Small Group Dynamics – Focusing on a Few**

The strategy that Jesus took in his discipleship method was to focus on a few for the purpose of multiplication. He invested in twelve men so that they could be equipped to invest in others and multiply His efforts. Any kind of training that occurs in a small group setting must be able to be easily passed on to others. New community groups would likely result from this, thus increasing the reach of the original facilitator and creating a wave of change throughout the community (Coleman, 1963, pp. 21-35).

Both the size and make-up of a group have an impact on how it functions as a whole. Based on research from conversation-based initiatives, the ideal and most effective group size is between six to ten people. This size is small enough to ensure that all members of a community group are given the opportunity to speak while still large enough to maximize discussion and provide diversity of opinion (Campbell et al, 2013, p. 3). There should also be a balance between new people coming into a group and more seasoned members being sent out to start new movements (Davis, 2012, pp. 18-20). As groups get larger, new leaders should be appointed from within current small groups to start their own (Patterson & Scoggins, 1993, pp. 62-63).

### **Reproducibility of Means and Methods**

Multiplication is the key to seeing a single community development intervention become a sustainable movement. Obedience-based learning is an important part of the journey to faith and the multiplication of a movement. Grigg says, “Theology, the knowledge of God, flows from obedience” (2009, p. 29). Teaching people to obey the commands of Jesus teaches people to apply what they learn and put it into action. This is a practice that should be done in love. This includes the command to teach and disciple others.

When starting a group, the goal from the beginning should be to train group members to start their own groups. Community leaders who have recently chosen to follow Christ should be encouraged to lead some of the meetings or even start their own meetings. This not only involves leading meetings with simple and reproducible methods, but also teaching group participant how to teach these simple methods to others. Having those who have had a worldview change stay in their communities will make it easier for them to reach other community members who have not yet changed. It is more successful to start a new group among an unreached population rather than isolating new believers in a way that cuts off their influence to others. There should be a system of encouragement and accountability in place to ensure that group participants teach others (Davis, 2012, pp. 18-20; Patterson & Scoggins, 1993, pp. 49-53).

Methods of sharing teachings with others should be simple in order to make them as easy to reproduce as possible. Oral storytelling is an effective and reproducible communication strategy through which group members can teach others in their slum communities. These can easily be worked into everyday conversations. Using basic biblical stories, especially those about redemption, to teach biblical principles about things in everyday life helps with retention of knowledge and allows this knowledge to be easily passed on to others. Stories also help people connect with concepts at the heart level of worldview (Patterson & Scoggins, 1993, pp. 51-53).

## **Conclusion**

Although worldview change is often discussed in mission circles in terms of faith movements, an argument can be made for holistic social change resulting from this approach. Worldviews influence how we perceive reality, and therefore how we interact with the world around us. It is the core cultural and religious beliefs within a person’s worldview that influence the decision-making process and how we choose to live. Thus, when seeking to bring about true and lasting transformation among a people, it is necessary to begin at the worldview level.

Addressing root worldview issues is precisely what make the transformational conversation approach to community development so valuable. The transformational conversation process encourages people to talk about an issue, identify root problems, collaborate in order to determine creative solutions, and eventually take action to bring about change in their own communities. By examining worldview in a conversational group setting, progress-resistant beliefs can be identified and a collective plan of action can be developed to solve community problems. This dialectical process is a way for the people to be empowered and secure a voice in their own destiny. Although this process takes time, it has the potential to produce significant and lasting community change.

Although the academic literature revealed some common themes related to transformation and conversational community development interventions, one must understand that the process of transformation looks slightly different in every context. In the field research portion of this study, I set out to discover the role that conversations play in various community groups in the city of Delhi.

# **Chapter 3**

# **Methods**

This research seeks to uncover how conversation is currently being used in community development interventions in Delhi to bring about worldview change and lifestyle transformation. In order to gain first-hand exposure to what I was reading about in the academic literature, I conducted a series of **participant observations** and **semi-structured interviews** with various conversation-based community groups in Delhi.

## **Primary Data Collection**

A total of **five observations** were conducted with various community groups in order to examine how conversation was being used in their group meetings. This allowed me to observe different group formats, and identify key themesand group elements that have the potential for transformation. Field notes and thick description were recorded during these observations.

A total of **twenty-three interviews** (eight with group facilitators and fifteen with group participants) were conducted in order to gather stories of transformation that have taken place as a result of participation in these community groups (see Appendix A). During the primary research phase of data collection, I interviewed a mix of English and Hindi-speaking respondents. Therefore, I had a translator accompany me any time I conducted an interview. I also audio recorded the interviews, which I later had translated and transcribed by a hired professional. With the consent of the respondents, these interviews were audio recorded in order to allow me to review the finer details of the interviewees’ responses after the fact.

Comparative **case studies** were then developed from the interviews and the participant observations. This element of primary data collection has allowed me to identify potential transformational elements of community group dynamics other than conversation that are already being used in community groups in Delhi. The resulting data has been used to develop a list of suggestions for community groups that incorporates conversations into the community development process.

I have used an analytic inductive process to analyze my data in order to identify patterns or themes from the observations and interviews that I conducted. After developing case studies, I used **triangulation** to assist with the **identification of emergent themes**. Triangulation seeks to find the convergence from different methods of research, integrating key themes that emerge from secondary sources as well as multiple primary research methods, such as interviews and case studies (Gray, 2014, loc. 1561).

**Validity**

The sample size of five community groups (through which twelve to twenty-four individual interviews were conducted) is a valid sample size, as this research is based primarily on case studies and gathering people’s stories. Participants from various sociocultural and religious backgrounds were chosen, which strengthens the external validity of the findings and increases the likelihood of the data being generalizable to fit any population (Gray, 2014, loc. 5140).

**Ethical Considerations**

An informed consent form was created to notify potential participants that participation in the study was voluntary. Those participating in small groups through Delhi House Society also receive services from the NGO. Such circumstances may cause clients to feel pressured to participate in a research study in order to continue receiving these services, whether this is explicitly communicated by the NGO staff or not. To ensure clarity in this area, I intentionally included a statement in the informed consent form specifically declaring that the delivery of services will not be withheld if individuals choose not to participate.

Interviewees were informed about the nature of the interview questions that would be asked and told how the interview responses would be used for the study. This allowed them to decide whether or not they would like to participate before the interview occurred. Because many of the questions being used were intentionally open-ended, consent was explained as both an initial step before the interview is conducted and an ongoing process throughout the interview. They were informed that they had the right to decline to answer any questions with which they were uncomfortable.

Participants were also informed about the minimal risk, if any, involved in participating in this study related to divulging personal information and viewpoints. They were made aware that the main benefit of this research would be its contribution to the academic body of knowledge, and that they would receive no monetary compensation for their participation. The consent form reassured the participants that any personal information that was collected would only be used by the researcher and would not be publically distributed.

To ensure further protection of the research subjects, participants were also given pseudonyms for the purpose of developing case studies. All personal information obtained in the data collection process has been de-identified and stored in a secure location.

With the assistance of a translator, I was able to verbally walk each participant (both literate and non-literate) through the informed consent form. This document was also translated into Hindi for native Hindi speakers.After covering each section of the consent form, I verified that the information provided to them was understood.After going through the entire informed consent form, the participants were asked if they understood everything that had been explained to them and were encouraged to ask me any questions they may have had about the research process to gain further clarity.

Participants who were literate were asked to provide their signature on the informed consent form to indicate that they had understood their rights as they had been read to them.

Although no participants chose this option, I had also prepared for an entirely verbal consent process to be made available to non-literate participants. This would have been conducted in their native language and documented by an impartial witness. This process would involve two forms:

(1) a short- form written consent document stating that the required elements of consent have been presented orally to the subject or the subject's legally authorized representative, and (2) a written, IRB-approved summary of what will be said to the subject or the subject's representative (Hicks, 2014, Documentation of Informed Consent section, para. 2.).

Those who were able to sign their names would sign the short form. Those who were unable to do this would indicate their understanding and agreement through verbal consent, which would be audio recorded. The researcher would sign the summary form, and the witness would sign both the summary and the short form. A copy of each form would then be given to the consenting participant. I will likely use this method of verbal consent if I decide to pursue further research on this subject in the future.

**Research Product and Action Outcomes**

Upon the completion of my research, I gave a presentation of my research to the DHS staff and the participants from Sewa Ashram in a **community reportback.** With the assistance of a translator, I provided an overview of my findings to the organization and the community. I also provided the NGO staff with a “handover,” a condensed twelve-page version of my findings, for their reference. Delhi House Society will also receive a copy of my final paper upon its completion.

If this paper or a shorter article about my findings is published one day (or personally requested by other organizations within DHS’s professional network), it will also be made available to other development workers. This will extend the contribution of this research to other organizations in Delhi or even other parts of the world.

I would like my research to eventually result in a community group framework for how to bring transformational conversations into the community development process. Those currently working with NGOs (particularly Delhi House Society) and development agencies will be the ones to implement any suggested community group discussion models or topics that the research has developed. In the near future, I will work with the Delhi House Society staff to develop a plan of action for implementing these suggestions into their current community groups.

**Community Benefits**

Delhi House Society, my partner organization, has been a participating body in my research. This research will directly benefit them as a community development organization, as they will be able to apply this new information to their current development practices and potentially make improvements to their current conversation-based community group programs.

There are no foreseeable immediate benefits for the case studies of participants in groups at organizations other than Delhi House Society upon the completion of this paper, as I have simply observed group interactions and interviewed group facilitators and participants about their experiences. However, because there were no major risks related to participating in this study, the benefits of participation have outweighed any potential risks.

The primary benefit in this study lies in the importance of the knowledge that has been gained, as is common in social and behavioral sciences research (Arwood & Panicker, 2014). This research may contribute to the larger body of academic knowledge on holistic interventions in grassroots community development in India, and potentially other cultural contexts as well.

# Chapter 4

# Case Studies:

# Stories of Transformation

As demonstrated by the various examples found in the literature, using conversation in the community development process is nothing new. However, how it is implemented may differ depending on the context. Five case studies were conducted with five different organizations to examine how conversations are currently being used in the community development process in Delhi. Each of these organizations has a different focus, displaying a wide spectrum of situations in which conversation can be used to promote change in both thinking and action (See Table 1 below).

Table 1: Overview of Case Studies

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Organization | Date of Founding | Number of Staff | Number of People Served Since Inception | Types of Programs | Key Conversations |
| Sewa Ashram (DHS) | 2001 | 10-15 | Between 1,050 – 1,650 patients (In reality, this number is likely higher.) | * Men’s Rehabilitation * Support Groups | * Dignity and Self-Worth * Future Planning |
| Emergent English Academy | 2005 | 6 |  | * Adult English Education * Professional and Intercultural Communication Skill Building | * Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue |
| Parivartan | 2010  (Church began before this) | 6-8 | 52 women and their families | * SHGs * Vocational Training | * Financial Management * Community Development |
| Community Action | 2009 | 2 | 45 women and their families | * SHGs | * Financial Management * Community Development |
| TFG Trust | 1995 | 6-8 | 5,000 women and their families | * SHGs * Adult Literacy * Vocational Training * Legal Literacy | * Financial Management * Women’s Empowerment |

**Life Groups – Sewa Ashram**

**Organizational Background**

Sewa Ashram is a men’s rehabilitation home in North Delhi run by an NGO called Delhi House Society (DHS). Since 2001, Sewa Ashram has been taking in destitute and dying men living on the streets of Delhi. Many of the homeless in Delhi are migrants from neighboring states (or even neighboring countries) who originally came to the city in hope of finding work and a better life. However, the lack of job opportunities and affordable housing in this large urban center leaves many migrants with no other choice but to live by the roadside. This desperate situation makes people vulnerable to disease, addiction, and involvement in illegal activities in order to scrape out a living. These are the people to whom Sewa Ashram opens its doors for holistic rehabilitation.

This work is truly a labor of love. It demands much but pays very little. The ashram generally operates with a team of ten to fifteen staff members (many of whom are former patients) who care for about seventy-five patients at a time. However, before the NGO had stricter regulations, the ashram would often exceed its capacity to almost two hundred patients, not wanting to turn anyone in need away. Since opening in 2001, Sewa Ashram has taken in well over 1,050 men from the streets, with some estimates over 1,650.

Although the staff hopes that all of their patients complete the rehabilitation process, they are also aware of the realities of relapse. Coming into a very structured environment is extremely difficult for people after years of living on the streets. Patients are constantly coming and going, some leaving within months, weeks, or even days of arriving. One staff member estimated that nearly fifty percent of the men who comes to the ashram leave before completing their treatment.

**Group Leadership and Format**

In order to reduce the patient attrition rate and facilitate the rehabilitation process, Sewa Ashram focuses on building social support through conversation-based community groups called Life Groups. These groups focus on building relationships, accountability, capacity, and planning a development program for each member in the group. Once a week, residents meet in their assigned groups to discuss their progress. Everyone has equal time to talk in the Life Groups. This allows the patients an opportunity to share their struggles and receive encouragement and advice from each other.

Each Life Group is made up of six to fifteen patients and is facilitated by both a Sewa Ashram staff members and a community role model. Community role models, as well as almost all of the staff members, are former patients who have gone through the recovery process and now live transformed lives. Given their similar life experiences, they are able to serve as guides through the difficult and often painful rehabilitation process. In most groups, the group members themselves also take turns co-leading the group’s discussion time.

Every group member is expected to participate in the discussion for their own benefit and for the benefit of others. Group discussions that typically take place in the Life Groups include the sharing of life stories, healthcare, hygiene, living with HIV and TB, life skills, financial skills, and social issues. Along with the time of personal sharing, each patient also develops an individualized growth plan. This includes future planning and goal setting. In the meetings to follow, group members keep each other accountable for the goals that they set.

In addition to these weekly meetings, each Life Group also meets once a month for an evaluation. This is a time when the group comes together to assess the overall progress of its members. As a group, members answer a standard list of questions that cover every element of the holistic rehabilitation progress. They then evaluate each other based on what they have observed in a person’s day-to-day life around the ashram. This is a time when the group can encourage each other in their progress, but can also be used as a time to revise goals and growth plans when necessary in order to better meet the pace of an individual’s progress.

Sarjant, the Development Coordinator at Sewa Ashram, first came to the ashram as a patient in 2009. Very soon after coming to the ashram, the staff saw leadership potential and took him under their wings. In collaboration with a DHS organizational consultant, Sarjant helped develop what are now known as the Life Groups. Because Sarjant had experienced life on the streets, he knew exactly what his fellow patients were going through – rejection from family, loneliness, and low self-esteem, among other things. He knew that the root causes of addiction and poverty that had brought these men to the ashram were primarily heart-level issues that needed to be addressed in a very personal way. These men needed to be shown that they had dignity and the God-given capability to bring about change in their lives.

Aarav, a staff member who came to the ashram as a patient six years ago around the same time as Sarjant, has also been instrumental in the formation of the Life Groups. Although he had no experience working with a group before coming to the ashram, Aarav helped the staff start up the Deweshwar Life Group for special needs residents. Together, he and his new group observed how other groups were being run and tried out different formats until they found one that worked for them. Aarav now works very closely with Sarjant in running the Life Groups, and has recently been assigned to help the weaker Life Groups develop a stronger relational bond and accountability structure.

Life Groups facilitate the larger rehabilitative process for the patients at Sewa Ashram. There are four major phases of rehabilitation:

* **Building Relationships and Establishing Trust** – The first stage is essentially about sharing stories. More often than not, this is the only “possession” a patient owns when he comes to the ashram. As the patients settle in and meet with their Life Groups, they are encouraged to open up and share their life stories. This can feel vulnerable at first, but as they listen to each other’s stories, they soon realize that all of them have similar stories and experiences. A natural bond develops among group members because they know that they have a community of people who knows exactly what they are going through. It is at this point that the patients begin to develop a sense of security and trust, which makes it easier for them to open up as time goes on.
* **Instilling Self-Worth and Personal Capability** – Once patients are physically and mentally stable, they are encouraged to take on small responsibilities around the ashram. Each Life Group is assigned to cover a specific section of the ashram. This can include anything from cooking or cleaning to assisting the medical staff with simple, non-medical patient care. Being able to work with their hands and manage small responsibilities builds a person’s confidence in their own abilities. They begin to realize that they are not simply recipients of services but that they have the capacity to contribute to the well-being others, which instills a sense of dignity and self-worth. Entrusting the men with work also helps the daily operations at the ashram to remain sustainable, and allows the ashram staff to observe and assess how a patient is progressing in the rehabilitation process.
* **Next Steps: Preparing for the Future** – When residents have shown that they can be trusted with small responsibilities, they are encouraged to set goals and plan for the future. Although self-reflection and personal evaluation are encouraged from the very beginning of the rehabilitation process, the third phase focuses specifically on change from the inside out in order to establish a firm foundation for success. The ashram feels that establishing such a foundation begins with spiritual transformation, but the staff also encourages the residents to set very practical and tangible goals, such as pursuing employment outside of their duties at the ashram. Through their Life Groups, they are able to access certain vocational and educational opportunities. They can also seek out training for basic life skills, such as money management, that will help prepare them for transitioning back into mainstream society.
* **Transition: Life Outside the Ashram** – Once these men have shown that they are capable of living independently of the ashram, they begin the process of transitioning out. This final stage has been the most difficult for residents in the past. Sewa Ashram has recently been revising their rehabilitation process in order to better facilitate re-entry into mainstream society. In July 2015, Sewa Ashram opened an off-campus transition home to assist in this transition process. At the transition home, the men continue meeting together just as they did in their Life Groups. They go through a process of economic and spiritual discipleship under the mentorship of a Sewa Ashram staff member until they are ready to completely move out on their own.

Throughout this rehabilitative process, the people receiving services from the NGO are involved in the transformation process.

**Social Support and Accountability**

For about three years after the groups started, Sarjant admits that group dynamics were a bit challenging. Most of the patients had never been involved in a group like this and were not sure what to do. Aarav says that working together in the Life Groups is not an easy transition for most of their patients, who have spent years living alone on the streets. Many of them are no longer accustomed to living in a family structure and only worry about making decisions for themselves. Some were also fearful about sharing personal information, as they had grown accustomed to a lifestyle driven by self-preservation. Rather than participate, the men would just sit in silence and listen to the group leader. People were primarily concerned with their medical treatment rather than inward change, and almost no discussion was taking place.

However, the staff found that encouraging the patients to simply share their stories helped break down walls and build community. As group members shared their stories, they realized that others in the group could understand their pain and relate to their experiences. They recognized that they were not alone, but actually had a community of people who could help support them in this rehabilitation process. Sarjant notes the importance of listening to people and giving them the space to share their story: “Our program is based on relationships. So we talk about that…We need to value each other and give respect. If you value someone, you listen to them.”

It still takes some time for new people to warm-up to the group, but not nearly as long as it once did. On average, Sarjant says it takes about two months for new residents to become comfortable sharing in the group. Now that the groups are more established, there is a good mix of older patients and newer ones in each group. This balance allows new members to observe group interactions and learn from the more experienced members about how the groups work.

Sharing life stories not only builds common ground, it can be used as a teaching tool. People learn from each other’s successes, but they also learn from each other’s mistakes. Because everyone has made mistakes, residents are encouraged to share their own experience, both good and bad, and use their own stories to encourage and warn others. Reflecting on his own experience, Aarav says, “When I was alone, I used to earn and then waste the money…I can teach them about how my life was when I was alone. Now we are together as a community. I teach through my life experience. It challenges me not to do wrong things because it affects my group.”

In the Life Groups, residents quickly see how their decisions affect others. Since coming to the ashram, a man named Mukunda has also experienced many ups and downs. After he first started working, he relapsed. This caused him to lose his job and later the joint microfinance loan he had been given through his Life Group. His poor choices affected others in his group, specifically those with whom he shared the loan. However, his Life Group decided to give him another opportunity by allowing him to work in the Life Shop, a microbusiness which was started by the ashram. His life has gotten more stable over time thanks to the support of those around him.

Sarjant has seen other patients go through similar experiences and knows that the social support of the group is crucial for individual success: “We know that people will fall down from time to time, coming from addiction. But to ensure that people do not relapse, other group members put conditions on them to help them. We don’t decide who people talk through their issues with. We just ask that they talk with someone with whom they are comfortable.”

Rabhav, an older gentleman who came to Sewa Ashram in May 2014, knows the importance of addressing the issues of an individual as a group. A Life Group leader himself, Rabhav says that when talking about recovery in the Life Groups, he has found that it is important to focus on the future rather than dwell on the past. Being able to walk through these issues with people brings healing and allows people to grow rather than regress.

Mukunda now understands that at the ashram, it is everyone’s duty to help and encourage each other through the rehabilitation process. He says that conversation is a good way for people to talk through life decisions. Sometimes he is wrong, and other times other group members are wrong, but they can correct each other and hold each other accountable: “In the Life Group, we see each other as family. Like in every family, craziness happens. Sometimes we are wrong. But we sit down together and talk about what is right and what is wrong. This is the way we can make our future.” However, he recognizes that it is God who ultimately does the work in people’s hearts and brings change in people’s lives. God provides for their every need and gives His people the strength to overcome their struggles.

The process of recovery and transformation looks different for everyone. Sarjant knows the importance of meeting people where they are at and not forcing them to move forward before they are ready, as this increases the risk of relapse. The key is to be understanding and have patience. He says, “If people don’t want to participate, we individually involve them, talk to them outside of the group one-on-one. Everyone carries a different capacity, so we need to understand this. Some people will open up, some people will take some time. We need to have patience for that and give them time.”

This has certainly been the case for Akeem Usman, a patient who came to the ashram about six years ago in June or July of 2009. When he first came to the ashram, he used to sit in the corner and do nothing. He felt sorry for himself and had no motivation or hope for his future. However, one day further into his treatment, he was able to observe one of the Life Groups. It seemed like something that might actually be able to help him and he found himself wanting to get involved with the Deweshwar Group for the disabled. At his first meeting, Akeem Usman shared with the group that he wanted to do something different with his life. They encouraged him to grow and do something with his life. It was around this time that Akeem Usman began talking to his group and the staff about opportunities to work.

Despite the great strides Akeem Usman has made in his recovery, he still has doubts that he can make it on his own. He feels that if he were to leave the structure and the accountability of the ashram, he would surely fall back into his old way of life and lose everything. This fear may be the result of his previous attempt to live outside of the ashram. For about two months, Akeem Usman rented a room from a man he did not know. During this time, he still made the trek back to the ashram every week to meet with his Life Group. Based on the stories he told his group about his new living arrangements, they felt that the situation was unhealthy for Akeem Usman. It seemed as though this person was not a very good influence and only wanted Akeem Usman’s money. The group eventually convinced him that this was not a healthy environment for him and he moved back to the ashram shortly after.

Sewa Ashram recognizes that preparation for re-entry into mainstream society is the part of their rehabilitation that is the most lacking. Fear of relapse is a common worry among residents at the ashram. They are attempting to rectify this shortcoming with their new transition home that opened in July 2015.

**Spiritual Transformation**

Sharing personal stories is the foundation for many conversations in the Life Groups, including those about faith. Because the ashram’s parent NGO, Delhi House Society, is contracted by the Indian government for social service delivery, Sarjant says that the staff is not able to share their faith in a direct or evangelistic fashion. They are, however, able to share their about their own life experiences and how their faith played a role in their transformation.

Sarjant uses his own story as an example of how God transformed his life at the ashram. Although Sarjant now identifies himself as a “follower of Christ,” he was not a believer when he first came to Sewa Ashram. Before coming to the ashram, Sarjant had two separate incidents in which people tried to lead him to Christ. Both times he considered becoming a Christian but then got caught up in his old way of life. However, it was when he came to the ashram that Sarjant finally decided to follow Jesus. What he saw at the ashram was very different from what his previous experiences with the Church. It was obvious to him that people here were actually valuing the poor and helping the helpless.

Inspired by love and service he saw at the ashram, Sarjant decided to dedicate his life to Christ after just three days into his stay. This is the day when he feels his life truly began. He is sure that God has given him a very specific gift and purpose in His Kingdom. At the very moment of his conversion, Sarjant felt very strongly that God was calling him to be involved in this same kind of work. Looking back on the course of his life, Sarjant sees that God had been calling him for quite some time, but he had no idea how to respond to this call until he saw it lived out the ashram.

Coming to Sewa Ashram also led Mukunda to follow Jesus. Although he came from a Christian family, Mukunda says he really did not know anything about Jesus or the Bible before coming to the ashram. After years of living on the streets, he had lost hope and felt no sense of purpose in his life. However, after joining his Life Group, Mukunda says he began to develop a relationship with God. Some biblical teachings that Mukunda has found to be powerful in guiding his life include, “Don’t say evil things toward other people”, “As you love yourself, you love your neighbor”, and “When someone slaps you, turn the other cheek.” He believes that Bible verses like these can bring change in a person when they apply it to their lives.

Mukunda now has the motivation to build a better future for himself and others. His faith has impacted how he communicates with other in the group. He has confidence when sharing his convictions to benefit others, saying, “I stand firm in what I stand for. My yes is yes, and my no is no. This is how I give answers. I don’t keep anything closed in my heart. What’s right is right, and what’s wrong is wrong.” Mukunda feels that one of the most important elements of success in the Life Groups is that people are open and honest, as this is how people grow. If someone is heading down the wrong path, the others in the group need to correct him rather than staying quiet in an attempt to keep the peace.

Akeem Usman feels that having Life Groups has provided him with the encouragement and stability that he needs to succeed. At a heart level, he has experienced a dramatic change both in his view of God and his feelings towards others. Through his Life Group, he has been able to connect with God on a deeper level. Although Akeem Usman grew up in a Muslim family, he now follows Jesus and attends the ashram’s community prayer meetings twice a week. Having this community has also allowed him to develop deep friendships with people who provide him with the accountability and support he needs to make wise decisions. When problems come up at the ashram, the group is able to discuss the issue, offer guidance to those involved, and often times solve the problem collectively.

Like a number of other residents, coming to Sewa Ashram also led Rabhav to Jesus. He believes that coming to the ashram has changed his whole life. Throughout his thirty-five years in Delhi, Rabhav had consistently shifted from one unstable living situation to another. Just over a year ago, he was living in a guesthouse with a friend when a problem arose. He was soon left with no friends, no money, no food, and nowhere to go. That is when he came to the ashram. Reflecting on his life, Rabhav said, “My life has changed a lot since being here. Before, my life was very bad. I had made a lot of mistakes. These mistakes ruined my life. I did not succeed in life. But now I am here, and I have set my mind on what I need to do in my life.”

When he came to the ashram, Rabhav was able to hear many stories from the Bible that touched him. A few people in his Life Group shared stories about this man named Jesus. He was interested in learning more, so he decided to begin reading the Bible. One story that he notes as particularly impactful was the Parable of the Prodigal Son, a story he felt was very similar to his own life experience. He says, “Now I believe in Jesus, in one true God. I used to believe in other things, but now He is the one I believe in…He has given me many chances.”

Rabhav admits that this whole recovery process has been extremely humbling, but has also allowed him to see the mercy of God in his life and given him hope and purpose. His greatest desire is to spend the rest of his life at the ashram, teaching others and giving glory to God through the way he lives his life. He wants people to know that life is precious, and encourages them to plan for the future. He has done extremely well in his recovery process and is even seen as a father figure by many because of the way he cares for his fellow patients. In July 2015, Rabhav took on the leadership responsibility of “House Father” in the off-campus transit home and is currently acting as a spiritual mentor for the other transit home residents.

Aarav had a similar conversion experience after coming to the ashram. When he first came as a patient, Aarav was Hindu. At the ashram, he saw that many people prayed and read the Bible. After the community prayer meetings, people used to come and talk to him about God. Over time, he began reading the Bible and eventually made the decision to follow Christ. He now sees himself as an ambassador of Christ, although he admits that he is far from perfect. On humility, he says, “I still make mistakes. I’m not one hundred percent pure. But I try my best to follow His commandments.” He knows that others in the recovery process struggle as well, and tries to share the Gospel with the other residents in a very natural and practical way.

One Bible story that he has found to be particularly impactful in his life was the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers in Luke 17. Although ten men were healed of their illness, only one praised God and returned to Jesus to thank him – and he was a Samaritan. Aarav, too, was a social outcast in his own society, but he knows the value of what he had been given in his healing. This story helps him remember the great love and generosity that has been shown to him by God, and reminds him to always give thanks for everything he has been given.

Although many of the patients at Sewa Ashram are not believers, Sarjant says he has never seen people get angry when people share stories from the Bible or their own personal faith journey. Every Life Group member is encouraged to share their own unique faith backgrounds, including Hindus and Muslims. Faith is a major part of many people’s lives, and often plays a huge role in how people view their recovery. Talking about faith can uncover areas of a person’s life that either help or hinder progress. Addressing these deeper worldview issues is crucial in the process of holistic transformation.

**Empowerment of Individuals and Communities**

Life Groups use conversation to address worldview issues that prevent progress, but they also offer residents opportunities to develop practical life skills. Future planning and goal setting, as well as developing respectful conversation skills, are a big part of equipping people to re-enter the outside world. This includes what Sarjant calls “smart planning,” which guides people through the strategy behind income-generating ventures, such as starting a microbusiness. Sarjant and the staff also offer “Economic Discipleship,” a training program based on biblical economic principles which teaches the patients skills in money management and financial stewardship.

One of the biggest changes that Sarjant has seen come out of the Life Groups is good decision making. He says, “If you give people good circumstances, they can make good decisions.” When patients have been given the opportunity to work around the facility, they seem to take more ownership – both of the ashram and their own recovery. Mukunda was the first patient to begin working. In spite of his daily struggle with HIV, Mukunda is still determined to do his job. He knows the second chance he has been given, and wants to live a life of thankfulness to the Lord, regardless of his circumstances. His example has inspired many others to work, including Akeem Usman.

Akeem Usman had seen that Mukunda and another man, in spite of their illnesses and disabilities, had begun working in the local market. As an HIV positive man with limited mobility, this gave Akeem Usman hope that he could work too. He talked through some ideas with a few other residents who were also interested in working and the ashram staff helped them apply for a program called Apna Rojgar Scheme (ARS), a government incentive that helps people set up self-employment initiatives. As a group, Akeem Usman and the others decided to start up a small stand in the local market called the Life Shop.

Many people at the ashram have been inspired by Akeem Usman’s progress. Going to work not only improved his mental well-being and boosted his feelings of self-worth, it also seemed improved his physical health. There are many others who have the desire to change their lives but struggle with knowing how to do it. Akeem Usman feels that sharing his experience and telling his story can help lead others in the right direction. He says, “When I share my story, a light goes off and they want to change. Before they were dead, but my sharing brings life. Other people think, ‘We have been here long enough. We should be doing something.’” Although Akeem Usman has never led the group, he shares in the group discussion every week and has a deep desire to encourage others in their abilities.

Aarav has seen his life change drastically from the life that he once lived on the streets. His desire is no longer to live for himself, but for God and for his family. He was recently able to reconnect with his family in Himachal Pradesh after years of being away from them. Aarav says, “Before leaving my home, I was very rebellious and was addicted to drugs. Now my relationships are good. From time to time, I get calls from my family, and I call them.” Although he does not think he will return to his home to permanently live with his family again, Aarav does want to visit frequently to make sure everyone is doing alright. He has no big dreams for himself and his future, but once of his greatest desires is to do something to help his younger sister have a better life.

**Key Themes**

Based on the stories of the Sewa Ashram staff and residents, the following themes were identified as being influential in the process of transformation at the ashram.

* Social support: People come with issues of loneliness, addiction, and illness, but found the support of “family” at the ashram.
* Every respondent made a decision to follow Christ after coming to the ashram.
* Conversations allow people to guide each other on the right path.
  + Social support provides patients motivation and accountability.
  + Sharing stories is crucial.
* Transformation takes time, and looks different depending on the person.
* Developing life skills is central to rehabilitation.

**International Perspectives – Emergent English Academy**

**Organizational Background**

Emergent English Academy is an adult English learning center that emphasizes the importance of conversation in the learning process. It is an experience-based program which engages students through verbal pair and group activities. Since 2005, Emergent has been helping students and young professionals to fine-tune their English skills in a very personalized way by drawing on the student’s actual personal experiences.

The school is located in a primarily Muslim area of Delhi, but welcomes students from any background. One of the unique elements of this school is the diversity of its classes. Emergent welcomes students from all over India, as well as a number of students from other countries in Asia, providing a multinational environment of learning. Along with equipping students with English conversation skills, one of the school’s primary goals is to lead people to be less afraid of encountering new people and ideas. Students are encouraged to bring their personal experiences, ideas, and opinions into the classroom. Through exposure to people from a variety of different countries and cultures, the students are encouraged to learn from each other and leave their own biases or preconceptions behind when interacting with the other students. This provides students with a safe environment in which they can be exposed to new cultural and ideological beliefs and ways of thinking.

Although this organization does not specifically focus on community development or community organizing, they do provide services that can improve a person’s quality of life. In India, just as in many parts of the world, learning English is a skill that can increase a person’s likelihood of gaining employment and moving up economically. These skills can generate economic uplift not only for the individual but also for their families and potentially even others in their communities.

**Group Leadership and Format**

In addition to their regular Monday through Friday classes, they also offer a Friday evening conversation club called International Perspectives. During this conversation club, students can engage in guided discussion with expatriates in Delhi, many of whom are native English speakers. This allows students to sharpen their English conversation skills while also learning about some of the cultures from the English-speaking world.

Will and Laurie, a married couple from the United States, currently serve as the Managing Directors of Emergent. They also teach some of the school’s upper level English classes and organize the International Perspectives club on Friday night. Before starting International Perspectives, Will and Laurie asked the question, “How can conversations help communities?” Emergent’s conversation club has been specifically designed to engage participants in discussions that have the potential for worldview change. Discussion topics often include hypothetical situations, which promote critical thinking and sometimes opens a conversation to explore moral decision making.

Will and Laurie see conversation as a way to break down walls and build intercultural community. Engaging in respectful conversation is a simple way to open up doors for intercultural and interfaith dialogue, which, in turn, can produce a greater sense of understanding and harmony in a community. They essentially want to introduce these young people to biblical principles of communication and interpersonal interaction without directly teaching them from the Bible.

**Modelling Biblical Principles**

Will and Laurie aim to model biblical principles and live out their faith in the way they teach and interact with others. One thing that they stress is to give others dignity and respect in all of their interactions. Not only do they model these principles, they require that their students conduct themselves in the same manner. During group conversations, for example, students are taught to allow each person an equal amount of time to share rather than trying to use as much time as they can for themselves.

The couple has seen that the nonverbal elements of a conversation can be just as powerful at communicating a message as a verbal exchange. Laurie says that the students have noticed that she and Will treat everyone in the class equally, regardless of their caste or social status. Will remembers one student telling them how impressed he was with the foreign guests who come to the conversation club on Friday nights. He remarked, “You do what we [Muslims] are supposed to do, and you don’t have our book [the Qur’an].”

Although Will and Laurie are very intentional about not “using their classroom as a pulpit,” they do feel the freedom to live out their faith in the spirit of cultural and religious exchange. Class activities and times of guided discussion often open up opportunities to pray for their students and share comforting words of wisdom from the Bible. They also feel comfortable sharing the meaning behind major Christian holidays such as Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, and encourage their Muslim students to share about their holidays as well. Sharing these stories has been informative and has opened a door for further discussions on spirituality. A few students have even asked for a Bible or other resources that would help them to learn more about their teachers’ faith. While it does not appear that any of their students have come to faith, Will and Laurie see the many positive things that have come out of the International Perspectives club – exposure to new ideas and other belief systems, a sense of curiosity, and a spirit of mutual respect and openness.

**Paradigm Shifts**

Will and Laurie note this multicultural exposure as one of the biggest sources of paradigm shifts. They admit that the majority of paradigm shifts that occur through these conversations are not spiritual in nature. However, academic and social paradigm shifts do occur as people are exposed to new information. This often happens in guided discussion times, during which students are given questions to answer and share about either with a partner or with the whole class. As students share their life experiences related to the topic, their eyes are opened to ways of life that may be different than their own. Sometimes these new ideas simply get added in to their current body of knowledge, but other times these thoughts might introduce a whole other paradigm, something that they never even thought existed in the world.

Laurie shared one story about a conversation the class had concerning poverty. And one student from another country said, “In my country, we don’t have any poor people.” The Indian students were all stunned and asked their teacher to explain how this was possible, but Laurie encouraged the student who had shared this to explain it himself. This student explained that in his country, the government provided for all the needs of the people, whether that was food, housing, or a variety of other things. As a class, they then talked through the pros and cons of both governmental systems. Although no direct change in action occurred as a result of this conversation, it certainly evoked thoughts about justice in the social order. It made the Indian students reconsider what a government is capable of providing its people and got them thinking about what India can learn from this other country in terms of how it cares for its people.

One young man named Shibly admits that, in the past, he used to make judgements about people that he did not even know based on their visible circumstances. When he saw impoverished people with no education and little food, he used to think that he was better than them. However, after being taught about respect and listening to others at Emergent, Shibly realized the importance of letting others explain who they are rather than jumping to conclusions. He says, “If you don’t talk to people, how can you know them?”

While paradigm shifts may not result in personal spiritual transformation, conversation does sometimes provide clarity and deeper understanding of other faiths. One young lady named Farida recalls a conversation with a Christian friend in which they compared their Holy Books. Although neither of them changed their religious beliefs, both parties came to a deeper understanding and tolerance of the other’s faith.

Conversations can often clear up theological misunderstandings, as Will discovered. He said that one of the biggest paradigm shifts that he has seen occur among some of his Muslim students is their understanding of the term “Son of God” in reference to Jesus. Many Muslims who are not properly acquainted with Christianity believe that this term insinuates that God had relations with Mary which led her to conceive Jesus. This is why Will always encourages his students to talk to someone about their faith rather than making assumptions about what they believe based on what you have heard from others. Will says, “Sometimes, I think, when we’re only talking *at* someone, we’re actually talking to the picture that we have of them that other people have put in our minds. But when we talk *with* someone, we actually – I think – move more clearly to the things that we have in common.”

Shibly recalls a few instances in which intercultural conversation led to paradigm shifts in his own understanding of Christianity. He once had a conversation with an American participant at International Perspectives who shared with him that culture and religion in the United States are not as closely linked as they are in places like India. The man told him, “Not all Americans are like the ones you see in Hollywood.” Shibly had a similar encounter with a visiting Swiss man. This man explained that the Bible teaches that Christians are not supposed to get drunk or be promiscuous, but rather to live moral lives and honor God with their bodies. However, some people who call themselves Christians still live in these sinful behaviors, even though their religion prohibits it. With this new information and frequent interactions with Christians, Shibly realized that Christians shared many of the same moral principles as Muslims. Many of the things that he had seen in the media did not reflect true Christianity.

Will and Laurie say that Western visitors have experienced similar paradigm shifts in their understanding of Islam. In the West, the only thing people know about Islam comes from the media, which often only speaks about Muslims when reporting the latest terrorist attacks. Some short-term Western visitors are obviously nervous when they arrive because they have never personally interacted with Muslims before and do not entirely know what to expect. However, after getting to know these Muslim students and spending hours with them in deep conversation, they realized that their previous ideas about Islam were not entirely accurate. The visitors found that these are just normal people who want basically the same things for their families that Americans do.

Along with paradigm shifts about other religions, people have even had awakenings about their own religion and culture. Amy, a visiting American guest, remarked that her own assumptions of Christianity were challenged in her conversations with Emergent students. Growing up in the American church, it is easy to assume that the Christian life looks a certain way based on what you have observed in church. However, coming to India led her to question some of the cultural aspects of American Christianity. She attempted to peel back the layers of culture that had been attached to her faith in order to find the true essence of the Gospel. “We are not here to change their culture,” Amy says, “but to share truth.” In order to do this and be understood, it is essential to have a basic understanding of a person’s culture when coming in to a conversation. However, it is also important to go in with a spirit of learning, and know that your ideas of this person’s cultural and religious beliefs will likely change as you talk to them and learn more about them.

Something that Will said while Amy was visiting one day led to a paradigm shift about her own role in sharing truth with nonbelievers: “We’ve told people the good news about who Jesus is. We’re not supposed to convert people, but to be His witnesses. It is God who converts people.” Amy now says that her deepest desire is to see her Muslim friends following and serving Jesus in a culturally-relevant way, even if they do not outwardly profess to be “Christian.” At this time, Amy does not know of any students who have begun following Jesus, but there do seem to be a few who are seeking to learn more about Him and heading in that direction. She recalls one Muslim lady in the class saying that she will be celebrating Jesus as her savior this Christmas.

**Empowerment of Individuals and Communities**

Adult English education, and education in general, has the power to bring change to individuals and whole communities. Shibly believes that education itself, in various forms, is key in bringing this harmony to both families and whole communities. He explained that when he and his brother became educated, they learned how to live with people better.

Shibly definitely sees the benefit of the conversational format that they use at Emergent. He says that he genuinely enjoys the conversational format of the classes and the conversation club. He feels valued and empowered when sharing his ideas with his classmates because of the mutual respect that the students give each other. Learning how to express himself in a multicultural conversational setting has increased his confidence in his own ability to communicate effectively. He has aspirations of one day working as an interpreter and feels that being able to talk to students from all over the world has helped him prepare for his future professional life.

Other students also said that Emergent helped them develop practical communication skills that can be used in the workplace. In class discussions, students are trained to conduct themselves with a certain level of self-control and diplomacy when disagreements arise. Rather than tearing a person down when there is a difference of opinion, a student must be willing to first let his or her classmates finish presenting their points of view before kindly presenting his or her own thoughts. Diplomatic communication is not only beneficial to the culture of the classroom, it is also an advantageous skill to have in the workplace, as it promotes a harmonious work environment. Along with acquiring vocational skills, this process of learning how to communicate respectfully also changes how many people view their other relationships as well. One student commented, “If we spoke respectfully like this in my family, there would be a lot less fighting. There would be peace.”

Laurie notes that a few of the students in her class are teachers themselves, and have changed their style of teaching to be closer to Laurie’s. In India, teachers generally use repetition and fear as some of their core teaching methods. Children may get hit if they are late to class or make a mistake on an assignment. However, because of the love and respect that Laurie displays with her students, many of these teachers have implemented the same attitude of care and respect into their own classrooms.

**Key Themes**

Based on the stories of the Emergent English Academy’s staff, students, and other discussion participants, the following themes were identified as being influential in the process of transformation at the school.

* Conversation breaks down walls and builds intercultural community.
  + Interfaith dialogue allows people to share ideas, including biblical truths. It also helps break down stereotypes and theological misunderstandings, such as myths about Christianity.
  + Conversation about life issues provides opportunities for prayer.
  + Facilitators lead by example, teaching biblical principles through behavior modelling.
* Most paradigm shifts that people experienced were cultural or academic rather than spiritual.
  + Conversations led to raised awareness about community or international issues.
  + Shifts in thinking happen over time, over the course of many conversations.
* Self-realization happens through conversation as people work through how to communicate who they are and what they believe.
* Professional and life skills were developed through conversation.
  + This includes critical thinking and logic, integrity, confidence, and courage.

**An Introduction to Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**

Self-help groups (SHGs) are some of the most common types of groups that use conversation in the community development process in India. SHGs are essentially savings groups where people are able to pool their capital in order to pay for large expenses. This allows individuals to take microloans at low interest rates – just 2-3% as opposed to the nearly 10-20% interest charged by outside loans. Most people from urban poor communities are unable to access formal bank loans due to a lack a lack of credit. Outside of a SHG or a microfinance organization, these women would have no other choice but to seek out an informal loan from either a relative or a loan shark.

The next three case studies look at how SHGs are being used to bring about change in impoverished communities.

**Self-Help Groups (SHGs) – Parivartan**

**Organizational Background**

Parivartan, which means “transformation” in Hindi, is a faith-based NGO that seeks to promote economic uplift and community empowerment in low income neighborhoods in West Delhi. Along with running a nursery and primary school, the organization currently hosts six different SHGs with fifty-two women between them. In the slum communities where they work, people struggle with a litany of social and economic problems – drinking, drugs, gambling, domestic violence, unemployment, and faulty or inoperative government facilities, to name a few. All of these issues ultimately impact the social and economic well-being of families.

Parivartan seeks to give a helping hand without giving a hand-out. Their SHGs provide women in the community access to loans with a low interest rate of just two percent. Along with low-interest loans, members of these savings groups also have access to vocational training, such as Indian pickle and spice making, and adult education programs, such as literacy classes. Parivartan’s staff also raises awareness of government benefits and assistance programs available to low income families.

**Group Leadership and Format**

Pastor Hardeep, the head of Cornerstone Church and the overseer of the Parivartan staff, believes that the Church cannot effectively work among the poor (or people from any community) without also caring for the social and economic needs of the people. He says, “Change does not come from the top-down, but from the bottom-up,” meaning that the people must be actively involved in the community development process.

Padma and Yachna, two of the NGO’s staff members, oversee Parivartan’s SHGs. They say that the ladies in the community take out loans for a variety of reasons, but the most common include children’s school expenses, family expenses (such as weddings or funerals), unexpected illness, home repairs, and starting small businesses. The group makes all of its loan decisions collectively, which involves a great deal of discussion. Each member of the SHG must agree to give someone a loan before the loan is granted.

In the SHG meetings, ladies talk about their financial needs. However, in discussing their financial needs, they also share about their family situations and other life problems. This is an opportunity that Padma and Yachna use to pray for their ladies. Although teaching the Bible is not a regular part of their SHG meetings, believers in the groups are able to share their own personal stories about how their faith has impacted their lives. This often includes references to applicable Bible stories. Christians in the groups also offer to pray with people when they share that they are having struggles.

**Social Support and Women’s Empowerment**

Manali has been an SHG member with Parivartan for three years. She took her first loan when her family was having difficulties making ends meet. After her husband got out of jail, he was unable to find a job because of his recent incarceration. Manali sold her jewelry, but the money was still not enough to cover their expenses. The Parivartan staff advised her to take a loan so she could open a small business. However, Manali met with some difficulty in her loan process when her SHG had hesitations about granting her loan. The Parivartan staff helped her plead her case and she was eventually granted her loan. With her loan money, Manali decided to open a grocery store near her home. After she saw that it was going well, she decided to take another loan so she could open a meat shop for her husband. Once they became financially stable, they were even able to build a bigger house to accommodate their growing family.

Aarti has been a member of one of Parivartan’s SHGs for the last four years. She decided to join the group because her husband’s unwise spending was causing financial strain for her family. Since joining, she has taken multiple loans – one for her mother-in-law’s funeral, another for household repairs, and a few others to cover the cost of her children’s education. Aarti says, “My husband drinks a lot, but I have courage. I am giving education to my children. I am standing on my own two feet. I take care of the financial decisions in my home. My husband drinks a lot and makes bad decisions sometimes. That’s why I make the financial decisions myself.”

Aarti says that many women in the SHGs do not tell their husbands that they are members because this would most likely cause more problems at home. The men might take their wife’s involvement in a savings group as a threat to their manhood and their role as the head of the household. Domestic violence is a big problem in their community, and suggesting that their husbands cannot financially support them could increase abuse. Ladies also worry that their husbands would make them bring home the money they had saved if they found out about it.

However, in other cases, husbands are proud of their wives when they realize that their family has savings or has been able to get a low interest loan. In these cases, domestic violence usually decreased and family life generally became a little more stable. This is exactly what happened with Aarti. Before Aarti took a loan to cover her mother-in-law’s funeral expenses, her husband had no idea that she was in a savings group. However, when they needed to pay for the funeral, Aarti was able to pay for it when her husband had no money available. He took this as a gesture of honor to their family rather than a threat.

Although she sees the benefit that women receive by joining these savings groups, Aarti knows that changes need to happen with the men in the community for more widespread change to take place. She really wants to see the unemployed husbands in the community find work and use their money wisely so that their families do not have to suffer. She wants to see her husband stop drinking and gambling, as this causes “small things to become big issues.” Her SHG prays for these men frequently, as well as others in the community who are struggling. If anyone has problems, the group is always there to talk, pray, and give advice, whether the problem is financial or personal.

Asawari has been a part of her SHG since it started seven years ago. She joined after hearing about Parivartan’s SHGs from one of the teachers at her children’s school. The first loan she took was to repair her roof when it fell in. The group came to inspect her house and take pictures of the damage for documentation purposes, a practice which Asawari says is common when a group is making a loan decision. After the inspection and some discussion, Asawari was granted her loan. Without the help of the group, Asawari says she would have “no way out” when emergency situations like this arose. Her husband has no job and therefore no money for extra expenses that come up. She has taken other loans since, including one to buy their family’s first refrigerator and other smaller loans to help cover smaller expenses like books or school fees for her children.

About five years ago, Asawari was elected by her fellow members to serve as the group’s president. Her group members recognized her as a responsible and sincere person, one who is very personable and able to persuade people easily. Asawari sees her main role as president to be one of an advisor rather than someone who tells people what to do. She takes her responsibility as the group’s leader very seriously, and talks everything out with the group before making any decisions that would affect the other ladies. She wants to help the ladies in her SHG in the best way possible, just like they helped her.

Asawari has seen her family’s situation improve since joining her SHG. She has less tension now that their lives have improved economically. Asawari no longer has to borrow money from family and friends when they are short, which has improved her relationships with her neighbors. Her daughter also used to be very sick but seemed to get better when people from the church and her SHG prayed for her.

**Spiritual Transformation**

Although Manali does not confess her faith publically yet, she says she began following Christ during this difficult time in her life. Manali first put her faith in Christ while her husband was in jail. When the Parivartan staff prayed with her for her husband, she had faith that God would answer their prayers and that her husband would one day return to her. After six months, her husband did come back and they both began to believe in Christ. However, when things started going well for the family again, her husband went back to their old Hindu beliefs. Padma laments that this is a very common occurrence in this community, saying, “This is the challenge for us. People believe in hard times but then they go back to their old beliefs. It is very common for this to happen.”

Manali says that she prays daily for her husband, and hopes that he will one day give his life to Jesus. She can already see signs of Jesus working in her husband’s life. He is willing to go to certain prayer meetings with his wife and seems open to Christ, but he does not seem willing to commit fully yet and is constantly going back and forth in what he believes. Her faith in Christ has helped her through many difficult times. When she is experiencing troubles in life, Manali says that praying to God brings her peace.

Since joining her SHG, Aarti says she has seen significant changes occur in her family. Her husband used to leave her and her children for two to three months at a time, and when he was at home he would frequently beat her. However, after she became involved with her SHG, she started learning more about Jesus from the NGO staff. When she started believing in Jesus, Aarti began reading the Bible and growing in her faith. She noticed the biggest change occurred when she began praying for her husband. Although her husband still struggles with alcohol, Aarti says that he no longer beats her or leaves home for long periods of time. He even has a steady job. She credits this change to her faith in Jesus.

The most encouraging change that Aarti has seen in her family is the strength of her five-year-old daughter’s faith. At the local school run by Parivartan, her daughter learned about Jesus through poems, Bible stories, and praise songs. She was also taught about the importance of prayer and exercises this principle frequently. Aarti says, “She [my daughter] learned that whenever she saw that there was a problem at home, she should pray. This has changed my husband. Even when we go to any relatives’ house anywhere, she prays. If anyone has difficult times, she prays. Whenever my husband and I have problems, she says, ‘Jesus Father is with us. Don’t worry.’” Aarti’s daughter serves as a constant reminder of God’s faithfulness to her, and encourages her to more actively witness to the power of God to transform lives.

Asawari is not a Christian, but she does pray to Jesus while still worshipping other gods. She feels that praying to Jesus has had a positive impact on her family. Asawari feels comfortable talking about her life problems with her group and frequently asks them to pray for her, saying, “Whenever the group prays, whatever is wrong with my family gets better.”

**Community Engagement and Organization**

Along with personal transformation, the Parivartan staff has seen the women in the community band together to address community issues. Padma recalls one instance when the community was experiencing a problem with their government-provided toilets. The drains were completely blocked and the government had refused to fix the problem. This posed a sizeable problem for the many residents who did not have toilets in their homes. Driven by mutual motivation and the power in their numbers, a group of ladies banded together and went down to the Members of Legislative Assembly (MLA) office to demand that their issue with their toilets be corrected. Soon after, workers were sent out to clean out the pipes and now almost half the community is using the toilets. This gave the women a newfound hope that change really is possible.

A prevailing mindset of fatalism is a common deterrent among the poor in India, as people simply accept their current circumstances as the lot that has been dealt to them in this life. Therefore, realizing that they could be involved in bringing about change in their own lives was a huge paradigm shift for these ladies. Since the toilet incident, the ladies have also approached local officials about cleaning up the parks in the community and closing three illegal liquor stores in the area. Both problems have now been rectified.

Asawari says that she has also seen many changes happen in the community since Parivartan’s SHGs began. When Asawari first came to this community twenty years ago, she remembers that there were sewer and water problems, as well as a lack of toilets. However, these problems have all been remedied in recent years with the help of the SHGs.

After seeing other ladies confront local officials in the past, Asawari and her SHG decided it would be a good idea to form a Resident Welfare Association (RWA) for the community that would handle the repair and maintenance of public facilities. Establishing this RWA was truly a community-wide effort, involving awareness meetings to discuss options and going door-to-door to get signatures from every resident. After everyone agreed, Asawari and her SHG went to the Member Legislative Association (MLA) to file an application for facility repairs. The problems were soon fixed and quality of life among the residents improved. The SHGs and the RWA still work together to address community issues as they come up.

**Key themes**

Based on the stories of the Parivartan staff and SHG members, the following themes were identified as being influential in the process of transformation in the community.

* Discussion was used to discuss financial needs and determine who gets a loan, but naturally led to discussion about other family or community issues.
* SHGs lead to community engagement and community organization.
  + Legal literacy: By taking collective action, government toilets in their community were repaired, and water problems were solved.
* Prayer is powerful and crucial to Christian witness in these groups.
* Involvement in SHGs led to improved family and community relationships.
* Involvement in SHGs led to increased discipline and stability for many women.

**Self-Help Groups (SHGs) – Community Action**

**Organizational Background**

Community Action is a church ministry and government-sanctioned NGO operated by Pastor Paras and his wife Jayshree. When the couple first moved into this slum in South Delhi in 2009, they were the only Christians in the community. Pastor Paras and Jayshree were met with a lot of opposition and abuse from the residents, but they continued to follow God’s leading and live out their faith through their ministry.

One issue that they found in the community was that teachers in the local schools were kicking the poor children out of their classroom. They knew that they had to step in as an advocate for these children. The young couple had very little money, but in faith, they decided to start a children’s after-school education ministry. Their children’s ministry, which began with just one child, now serves one hundred and fifty children in the community. Soon after, they started the self-help groups (SHGs), which Jayshree oversees.

Throughout these difficult years, they remained steadfast and continued to show kindness to their neighbors even under heavy abuse. Nearly six years later, they are excited to report that they have seen an overall improvement in the quality of life of the community, and there are now many people in the community who follow Jesus.

**Group Format and Accountability**

The SHGs meets at Pastor Paras and Jayshree’s church on the 10th, 11th, and 12th of every month. Jayshree says that women take loans for a variety of reasons, but there are three things for which Community Action will never authorize a loan - festival spending, arranging child marriages, and buying drugs. She says that the SHG members collectively came up with the rules and restrictions concerning loans. They see this as wasteful spending and are not willing to finance it when the money could be used in a more beneficial way. Unlike the SHGs at Parivartan, the group can grant a loan based on a majority vote rather than getting agreement from the entire group.

The SHGs function on a system of group accountability. Each SHG has around fifteen members, and each member should expect to receive a loan at some point in the cycle. If someone does not pay back her loan, the group uses social pressure to urge the individual to pay it back. If she does not pay it back within a reasonable amount of time, she is kicked out of the group.

However, Jayshree happily reported that everyone who has ever taken a loan has repaid it in a timely manner. One woman named Anjani has taken two loans since joining the group three years ago – one for the birth of her child and another to care for her husband when he was sick. Another woman named Niva, who also joined the SHG three years ago, has taken three loans – one to repay her previous loans to a high-interest lender, another to buy a swamp cooler for the sweltering summer months, and a third to pay for her child’s schooling. Both ladies have paid back their loans on time. The social repercussions for defaulting on a loan are much too high for a person to treat lightly.

**Spiritual Transformation**

Thanks to the steadfast commitment and witness of Pastor Paras and Jayshree, many people in the community have decided to follow Christ. In Community Action’s original SHG, almost every member in the group as Hindu. However, three years later, the majority of the group members profess that they are Christian, and now attend Pastor Paras’ church.

Anjani remembers the day that her life changed for the better at Pastor Paras’ church. A friend of Jayshree, who was visiting the church that Sunday, taught her about the importance of offering and the blessings that come when God’s people are faithful to him in this way. Understanding that the majority of the congregation had very little money, Jayshree’s friend encouraged Anjani to be faithful with what she had to give. It was not about the amount given but about the heart of the giver: “Even if your husband only makes 20 rupees, you should still give about 2 rupees.” After that, Anjani started giving between 2 and 10 rupees. By the grace of God, Anjani says that she soon saw change come to her husband and her whole family. She has been giving faithfully ever since, and says that she has never felt any lack.

During this time, the Lord began to bring hope into Anjani’s life. Before she knew the Lord, Anjani would have suicidal thoughts because of her family’s desperate financial situation. She would often cry herself to sleep over it. However, now that she follows Jesus, Anjani says that life seems so much easier. She no longer worries about her finances because she knows God will provide for their needs. She feels as if God has “scooped her up” into His arms, and He will carry her through any difficult times.

Niva also saw changes happen in her life after joining the group and hearing about Jesus. Before she started following Christ, she used to be sick all the time. She used to do a lot of Hindu worship rituals with her family. Now she recognizes she was living in darkness. When she began following Jesus, it was as if light came into her life and healed her. She also miraculously went from illiterate to literate after Jayshree’s sister prayed with her and shared about the Bible. Now she is able to read whole chapters of the Bible on her own. Like Anjani, Niva has seen change come to her husband as well after she joined the group.

Although this specific SHG started out with mostly Hindu members, the majority of the members now follow Jesus and attend Pastor Paras’ church. Niva says they pray together as a group and often use the Bible in their discussion. This is especially important when there are disagreements about granting loans or making personal financial decisions. They ask the question, “If Jesus was in our place, what would He do?”

One of the most drastic transformations that Pastor Paras and Jayshree say they have seen in the community happened in the life of a Hindu-background woman (and the SHG’s president) named Gunasundari. Before joining the SHG, Gunasundari used to have major issues with anger. She felt as though she had no peace in her life. When she joined her SHG, she began to hear stories about Jesus. Some that she remembers to be particularly impactful include the Parable of the Persistent Widow in the book of Luke and Jesus proclaiming Himself as the “Light of the World” in the book of John. She also remembers a teaching that she thinks is found in the book of James, which essentially says if you follow after God’s heart, He can help you do anything. These passages taught her that she could trust God to take care of her needs.

In 2011, Gunasundari made the decision to follow Jesus. Even though her entire family was still Hindu, she began attending Pastor Paras’ church and soon began to see a change in her life. She finally felt peace in her life. Over time, her husband and children also believed because of the way they had seen her life change. Her oldest son and extended family are still not believers, which can make family life difficult at times. But she prays for them and has faith that they will one day come to know the Lord as well.

**Empowerment of Individuals and Communities**

Before joining the savings group, Anjani says that she used to have to sell her jewelry to get money for unexpected expenses. In India, owning jewelry is often a woman’s only financial security if her husband dies or leaves her. This meant that she was frequently dipping into what is essentially her “life insurance” just to cover costs. However, joining the group made life a lot easier and made her house a lot more peaceful.

Jayshree and other ladies in the SHG say that one of the biggest changes they have seen in the group members is the increase in confidence that they have experienced. Niva tells of a time when the community had a water problem and nothing was being done to resolve the situation. Ten ladies from the group decided to go down to meet with the governing minister in charge of their colony and the problem was fixed the next day. By taking charge of their finances, these ladies had realized they could take charge of other areas of their lives as well. They were no longer slaves to the force of fate.

Gunasundari echoed this feeling of confidence. Before she knew Jesus, she used to be intimidated by people with better clothes or anyone who seemed to be better off than her. Now she knows that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. With confidence, she said, “Now no one can say anything to us [to put us down] because now we know who we are.” She says that there also seems to be less fear in the community because they see the power of working together. There seems to be more unity among community members, and it is evident that people know and love each other.

The ladies have also increased their financial knowledge. Before joining the group, many of them had no savings and did not even know how to use a bank account. Because they had no credit, they had never taken a loan from the bank. Now they have experience in how to navigate this system and actually have money to save in the bank thanks to years of persistence. One woman jokingly said, “We have so much money we get tired of counting it!”

The ladies have also learned more about how to access government services. In the process of establishing their ministry, Pastor Paras and Jayshree became well acquainted with how to navigate government and social systems, and now share this wisdom with their SHG members. They assist their neighbors in accessing certain government benefits, such as old age pensions, certificates for the handicapped, and education assistance for low-income children.

**Key Themes**

Based on the stories of the SHG leaders and participants of Community Action, the following themes were identified as being influential in the process of transformation in the community.

* Self-realization came through conversation, specifically conversations with believers about God and the Gospel.
* Involvement in SHGs provided ladies with social support and led to community organization. (Ex: Water problem)
* Spiritual awakening and paradigm shifts happened through conversation.
  + The prayer and presence of local believers played a key role in these worldview changes.
* Christians teach biblical principles through behavior modelling and simply living out their faith.
  + Sharing their faith happens naturally as people share their lives in group discussion. If anyone is experiencing life problems, believers share about God and offer prayer.
* Involvement in SHGs led to improved family and community relationships.
* Involvement in SHGs led to increased discipline and stability for many women.
* As membership grew, multiplication occurred through the creation of new groups.

**Women’s Empowerment Education – Gender Resource Centre (GRC) and The Full Gospel Trust of India**

**Organizational Background**

The Full Gospel (TFG) Trust of India is a Christian development, relief, and advocacy organization. They have been working with the poorest segments of society in North West Delhi since 1995. Their goal is to help everyone regardless of religion, sex, or caste background. However, they do make an effort to ensure that the poor in the church do not stay poor, as they believe that the church is to be a beacon of hope and serve as an example to others.

Ebrah, the National Director of TFG Trust, has been upfront from the beginning about the role that their Christian faith plays in the operation of their organization. However, he has also been very intentional about separating the church elements and the social work elements of their operation. Ebrah sees this as an important balance to maintain in their work, as this allows the church to remain committed to spiritual growth in the community and the NGO side of the organization to stay focused on the social element of development.

Their approach has been well-received by both the community and the local authorities. A few years ago, a government minster came to inspect their operation and saw that their organization was doing good work. With full knowledge of their Christian foundation and church affiliations, TFG Trust was contracted by the government to carry out a number of government schemes (programs) in the larger Northwest Delhi area. Their contract gives them access to about five lakh (500,000) people in various communities, although only about 5,000 women and their families have been engaged with their services so far.

**Group Format**

One of TFG Trust’s main endeavors is their network of self-help groups (SHGs) through the Gender Resource Centre (GRC), their women’s empowerment program. These SHGs provide women with an opportunity to take loans and develop savings, but it also provides them with opportunities such as vocational training, literacy education, legal counsel and advocacy assistance, and health services, with a specific focus on women’s nutrition. Their SHGs also include discussion forums on women’s empowerment issues such as domestic violence, civil and human rights awareness, and other topics that might be pertinent to the needs of the community.

**Social Support and Accountability**

Group facilitators lead discussion forums on social issues, providing ladies with access to new information and training that they can use to equip themselves for community action. Using this new knowledge, group members can reflect on their own life situations and discuss how best to address these issues. This format allows people to learn from each other’s experiences and get advice for their own problems. This can provide them with practical steps to take action.

Saguna, an SHG member, says that the purpose of the SHG is to provide women with support in all areas of life, not just financially. First, it brings “pain relief,” as women share their struggles and realize that they are not alone. This brings comfort and allows people to build trust very quickly based on their similar experiences. This community provides its members with an intimate setting in which they can discuss their problems together and hopefully come to solutions through the encouragement and suggestions of others. This collective process is something that ends up benefiting the entire community, as changes in the lives of individuals end up influencing others.

Nina, a group motivator, points out that it is not very common for people to talk about their problems with their families. However, these groups allow women the opportunity to share their struggles and even encourages them to talk about taboo issues such as domestic violence. When ladies first start in a group, they are often very quiet and reserved. However, as time goes on, they feel more comfortable and confident about sharing their problems with others.

Family dynamics are often improved when women take loans. In Indian families, it is generally the husband that makes the major decisions, including financial decisions. However, when women join these SHGs and take loans, they often earn respect from their husbands. Nina says that women never take loans for themselves. It is always for their home or their family.

**The Role of Spirituality and The Church**

Because of the distinct separation of religious and social work in TFG Trust’s operation, Bible stories are not generally a part of the group meetings. Although TFG Trust is a Christian organization, the majority of their SHG leaders are Hindu. However, believers in the SHGs will sometimes share personal stories of how their faith in Christ helped them during times of trouble.

Talking about faith does not generally cause problems among the ladies. Many Hindus in the groups even say that the Bible has many good teaching about how to live a good life. Rina says that she is Hindu but that she also believes in Jesus. She feels that all religions teach the same basic moral principles and is, therefore, open to hearing stories from the Bible when people share them. Saguna and Anahita, who are both Hindu, agree with this sentiment, and say that they have never seen religion cause any problems during a group discussion. Although people come from different religious backgrounds, they all come together in unity to solve the problems in the community together.

**Empowerment of Individuals and Communities**

Saguna and her fellow SHG member Anahita say that the biggest change they have seen in their community is an increase in unity and confidence among women. Anahita says women used to stay at home and do nothing but housework. Now they meet regularly and find solutions to family and community problems. This is a process that empowers women and changes whole communities.

Rina, a TFG Trust staff member, originally came to TFG Trust in 2009 as an SHG member. She and her husband were having financial difficulties, and a friend in the community suggested that she join one of the savings groups. Although she is an educated woman, Rina says she had very little confidence before coming to TFG Trust. Like many of the other woman when they first com, Rina was very shy and did not speak very much during their group meetings. However, since being involved in the women’s empowerment program, her confidence has increased dramatically. The TFG Trust staff would constantly encourage her in her abilities and even gave her many opportunities to help train other women in vocational skills.

One of the things that were most encouraging and empowering to her during her time with TFG Trust was when she saw that she was able to impact the lives of the other women. Before receiving training in their groups, many of these women would only earn about 200 rupees per day. Now many of these ladies are able to use these skills to earn 1,500 to 2,000 rupees per day. Rina now helps run the Gender Resource Centre and has been appointed as the head group motivator for all of SHGs in her community. She currently has ten groups under her care. She teaches from uses her own life experiences to teach the other ladies and often shares personal life stories as examples. She tries to instill confidence in these women and encourages them to speak up for themselves and stand up for their rights. Rina says, “I always tell ladies to speak out because I remember I used to not speak.”

This newfound confidence and unity among women in the community is evident in the way they politically organize themselves to address community issues. Nadira, a TFG Trust staff member, remembers a time in her neighborhood when they were experiencing issues with their water distribution. She and a group of women went to present their case to the water board and insisted that the problem be fixed. The junior engineer seemed a little afraid of the women and asked them to simply call (rather than coming down with force) if they had any other problems in the future. TFG Trust encourages community members to resolve community issues through a conversational approach first, but also gives them the skills to take legal action if this does not work.

After attending legal awareness and education classes, the ladies in the community have also become more willing to stand up for their rights as women. Nadira says that more and more ladies are willing to report domestic violence when it happens. Women are even training their daughters in how to defend themselves when they are harassed by boys. Many mothers and daughters are enrolled in self-defense classes that are offered by the GRC.

**Key themes**

Based on the stories of TFG Trust’s staff and clients, the following themes were identified as being influential in the process of transformation in the community.

* Discussion in SHGs and other group meetings gives room to talk about life issues.
  + Discussion encourages critical thinking and problem solving.
  + Women were encouraged to talk about difficult and taboo subjects. (Ex: Domestic Violence)
* Group meetings and conversations focused on empowering and equipping women.
  + This led to community organizing and political action. (Ex: Water Problem, Eviction and other housing issues)
  + Group involvement increased confidence.
  + Group participation allowed women to develop life skills, including literacy, budgeting, and navigating government services.
* Having a resident Christian witness is necessary for spiritual transformation.
* Relationships were strengthened and the community became more unified as a result of the women’s empowerment groups.

**Conclusion**

These five organizations, each with its own unique focus and approach, are using conversation to bring about change in people’s lives. Each of the groups I observed functioned in their own unique way, but each one exhibited common themes related to the process of worldview change and lifestyle transformation. While these conversations do not always bring about a holistic transformation in worldview, changes in both thinking and behavior have occurred. Paradigm shifts came through the sharing of new ideas, and lives were changed when people put this new knowledge into action. However, it seems that one of the most impactful elements of these conversational settings was not always the content alone, but often the process and the people involved. As the next chapter shows, there are many different elements that must be present in order for conversations to be effective in bringing about change.

# Chapter 5

# Analysis and Key Themes

## **Emergent Themes**

* The Role of Social Support and Relationships
* Increased Confidence and Empowerment through Group Participation
* Stories (Both Biblical and Personal) as a Powerful Witness
* The Power of Prayer and Presence

### **The Role of Social Support and Relationships**

Development at the grassroots level is most successful when it is community-led and relationally-focused. The desire for change must come from within the community. While the majority of the groups were not necessarily “community-led” in terms of organizational leadership, each community group functioned through community participation.

Community conversations are beneficial because of the personal relationships and social support networks that are built or strengthened in the process. Patients at Sewa Ashram reported that when they first came to the ashram, they struggled with issues of loneliness, addiction, and illness. However, after establishing relationships of trust with their Life Group members, they eventually found the support of “family” at the ashram. Having a system of social support built on friendship and genuine commitment to each other gives people the space to be open, honest, and vulnerable.

Communication is usually most effective when people can identify with the communicator (Kraft, 1987). For this reason, community conversations are most productive when the conversation facilitators are from the same community, or at least a similar background as the participants. This ensures that a certain level of understanding and trust has already been established with the participants – one that an outsider would not necessarily have (Figueroa et al, 2014; Nida, 1990). A relationship of trust must be developed before any meaningful communication can take place (Nida, 1990).

Conversations allow people to guide each other on the right path, giving advice and having it received because trusting relationships have been established. In the SHGs specifically, discussion about practical issues, such as determining who is granted a loan, also gives people room to talk about other life issues, such as family or community problems. This is a natural progression that takes place as friendships deepen and the group becomes more comfortable with each other.

By establishing friendship and trust, groups also establish a level of commitment, both to each other and to the task at hand. This allows a system of accountability, mutual encouragement, and motivation to flourish. Having this kind of social support has been helpful for Sewa Ashram’s residents in setting and meeting the short and long-term goals that they make in their Life Groups. Participants keep each other accountable for the goals they set, and offer advice and assistance to their fellow group members when needed. A similar kind of accountability structure in the SHGs at Parivartan, Community Action, and TFG Trust ensures that people pay back their loans.

Conversations were also found to build unity in a community. In every case study, respondents reported that community conversation either improved or strengthened community relationships. Working together toward a shared goal fostered a common bond and a genuine love and commitment to each other. Along with improved relationships in the groups themselves, SHG participants from Parivartan, Community Action, and TFG Trust also said that they had seen a positive change in their family relationships. Worldview change usually takes place in the lives of individuals before the community as a whole begins to think differently about the problems they face. One person influences others, acting as a catalyst of change (Ward, 2014).

The respondents from Emergent English Academy found that conversation breaks down walls and builds intercultural community. This environment opens up an environment of interfaith dialogue, and allows for sharing of ideas, including biblical truths, thus opening the door for Christian witness. Simply talking to someone and getting to know them breaks down stereotypes. The instructors at Emergent noted that conversation allow expatriate believers to dispel common myths about Christianity that are widely believed in the Muslim community. Likewise, common beliefs that many Westerners had about Muslims often changed when they simply sat down to talk with the Muslim students. In both cases, some level of change occurred to people’s understanding of the world, even if they experienced no change their own religious belief system.

Having groups that are relationally-focused is extremely important in the process of individual transformation because the process of change looks different for everyone. At Sewa Ashram, the staff realizes that patients come in with different strengths and weakness, different experiences, and at different stages of life. Similar to the Rockefeller Foundation’s Integrated Model of Communication for Social Change (IMCFSC), Sewa Ashram uses dialogue to promote both social and individual outcomes (Figueroa et al, 2014). Recovery is certainly not a one-size-fits-all operation. The ashram uses the emotional and spiritual support of social relationships to aid in the process of individual growth. Like Christian-Based Counselling (CBC) in the Philippines, Sewa Ashram strives to make holistic healing as community-led effort as possible (Manzanilla-Manalo & Manalo, 2014). Just as the community can affect the lives of individuals, individuals can invest in their communities to bring about change in the community as a whole.

### **Increased Confidence and Empowerment through Group Participation**

Communities are empowered when they are directly involved in the decision-making process. Although assisted by an NGO in many cases, group participants were able to be directly involved in the development process through discussion. The organizations working in these communities were intentional about allowing group members to contribute their previous knowledge and experiences into the group discussion for the benefit if other, while at the same time introducing new information that would aid in the community development process (Holland & Henriot, 1983; Kraft 1987). Group participants at every organization reported that their confidence level increased as a result of participating in these groups. This boost in confidence was commonly the result of people being actively engaged in the development process.

Participatory and communication-based models are essential for worldview change (Kraft, 1987). People who were directly involved in the community development process through group discussion were able to overcome the prevailing fatalistic worldview in their communities, as it gave them confidence that they had the power to bring about change in their own lives. For Christian participants, a common theme was that God had the power to bring about change in their lives, which encouraged them to pray and take action in the strength of the Lord.

When working together to address community issues, discussion in these groups inadvertently cultivated critical thinking and problem solving. Community conversation and collaboration frequently led to community organizing and political action among SHG members. By taking collective action, the SHG members at Parivartan were able to have the government toilets in their community were repaired. Later on, they created a welfare association for their slum and now have awareness meetings in which they discuss the development of the community. Likewise, when the SHG participants at Community Action and TFG Trust worked together to confront local authorities, their water problems were quickly solved. The TFG Trust group also met together to organize a plan of action that would address the threats to their houses.

SHGs specifically are places where women can be equipped and empowered in a male-dominated society. In an intimate group setting like this, where trusting relationships have been established, women feel comfortable talking about difficult or even taboo subjects such as sexual assault or domestic violence. The Gender Resource Centre (GRC) at TFG Trust encourages women to stand up for their rights and even provides them with free legal counsel and advocacy services to assist them through this process. The SHGs at Parivartan also offer legal literacy training, and encourages women to be the change in their own communities. Each SHG had stories to tell of how their communities benefited through political organization, from fixing toilet and water problems to preventing evictions and the demolition of houses.

Participation in these community groups also allowed members to develop practical life skills. Through their Life Groups, Sewa Ashram residents were able to develop skills in communication, financial management, and life planning, such as setting and achieving goals. Simple things like being able to find work and use these skills on the job greatly increased the patients’ confidence. Although unintentional, students at Emergent English Academy were able to cultivate certain professional skills through classroom conversation, such as logic and critical thinking. Through the influence of their Christian teachers, they were also exposed to the importance of certain moral principles such as equality, honesty, and integrity in their work. Applying these skills in their lives gave them more pride in their work, boosted their confidence in their professional abilities, and gave them courage to attempt difficult but worthwhile endeavors.

The SHG participants at Parivartan and TFG Trust were also given opportunities to receive vocational training as a part of group membership, which would empower them both economically and socially. Other practical skills that these SHG participants gained included literacy, budgeting, and navigating government services. Involvement in the community groups also increased the level of personal discipline and stability that both the SHG members and the Sewa Ashram residents felt in their lives.

Participants also reported that they learned more about themselves during times of conversation. At Emergent, students reported that discussions about deeper worldview-level topics caused them to examine their own beliefs. They had to be able to communicate to others who they are and what they believe. The patients at Sewa Ashram and the SHG members at Community Action also reported that they came to a greater realization of themselves, which primarily came through knowing the God who made them. Gunasundari specifically said she was able to see herself in a new light – as a child of God, created in His image and worthy of love, even if the world told her differently. This increased her confidence in her own potential and encouraged her to become more actively engaged in the church and her community.

Equipping people with these kinds of skills empowers communities to bring about their own change. Even when NGOs are engaged in a community, the people should be agents of their own change, actively involved in the development process. Finding the balance between the role of the NGO and the people in this is crucial for sustainability (Figueroa et al, 2014; Campbell et al, 2013).

Increased social support was integral in a person’s confidence and willingness to act on their newfound empowerment. People realized that there is power in numbers, and were more likely to fight for their rights if others are fighting along with them. Because social harmony and cohesion are such high values in Indian society, it was only practical for community members to stand up against such injustices if the rest of the community was willing to do it as well. However, having a strong network of social support has also led to a certain level of dependence that has become debilitating for many of the residents at Sewa Ashram in the long run. Although the life skills learned through the Life Groups at Sewa Ashram can empower the patients in a very practical way, many residents still admit that they do not feel strong enough to leave the ashram and survive on their own.

### **Stories (Both Biblical and Personal) as a Powerful Witness**

Although storytelling was not a pre-planned element of most of the groups, sharing stories, whether biblical or personal, was a natural part of conversations. Storytelling is an effective teaching tool in the two-thirds world, as many of the people in these regions come from oral cultures (Grigg, 2009). Sharing biblical principles in this way touches the heart and causes people to reflect on their own lives. Many patients at Sewa Ashram noted that hearing people share Bible stories in their Life Groups introduced them to Jesus. This led to a very significant change in their religious worldview, which then positively impacted their view of their own self-worth and consequently their lifestyle choices. At Community Action, biblical stories and teachings brought many of the ladies in the group to faith and changed their view of themselves and others.

Telling stories is also a less confrontational way for believers to share truth with nonbelievers, especially in cases where evangelism is legally or socially prohibited, as is the case with many organizations in India. Because Sewa Ashram and TFG Trust receive government funding, they are not allowed to directly teach from the Bible, but they are able to share from their own experiences how these teachings impacted their lives. The same is true of Emergent, where suspicions of evangelism in the past have caused social tensions for Christian instructors in the primarily Muslim community.

Many of these organizations used biblical stories as parallels for the participants’ personal or community issues. Stories, especially biblical parables, are powerful teaching tools, as they encourage critical thinking and inward reflection about our own situations. Learning through stories often provides the listener with an almost hypothetical situation, which allows them to think about their own problems from an outsider’s perspective. This allows a community member to remove him or herself from a situation and approach a problem more objectively and practically (Patterson & Scoggins, 1993).

Even when group participants did not come to faith in Jesus, participants from the religious majority expressed that being able to share their religious narratives with each other was an important part of sharing their personal beliefs. Muslim students at Emergent actually found that common ground was established with their Christian friends when they realized that they shared many of the same religious narratives. Hindu participants at TFG Trust said that they found wisdom and good teachings in the Bible, even though their personal belief system as a whole did not change. However, some said that some of these teachings influenced the way they lived and interacted with each other in a group.

No two people referenced the same Bible story or teaching as being personally impactful, indicating that there is likely no set curriculum for teaching the Bible in these community groups. However, nearly every respondent eluded to the significant role that prayer and the presence of believers played, either in their own coming to faith or the improvement of their communities (See Table 2).

Table 2: The Impact of Faith in Transformation

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Organization | Bible Story | Biblical Teaching | Other Impactful Group Elements |
| Sewa Ashram | * The Prodigal Son (Luke 15) * Story of the Ten Lepers/The Thankful Leper (Luke 17) | * Do not Speak Evil Against Others (James 4) * Love your Neighbor as Yourself (Matt. 22, Mark 12) * Turn the Other Cheek (Matt. 5, Luke 6) | * Prayer * Presence of Believers |
| Emergent English Academy | * The Christmas Story * The Resurrection Story (Good Friday and Easter) | * Explanation of the term the “Son of God” | * Prayer * Presence of Believers |
| Parivartan | --- | --- | * Prayer * Presence of Believers |
| Community Action | * The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18) | * Jesus is the “Light of the World” (John 8) * God helps those who follow after His heart (James 1) | * Prayer * Presence of Believers |
| TFG Trust | --- | --- | * Presence of Believers |

Along with biblical stories, the personal stories of group participants were powerful to the other members. In the case of the Sewa Ashram residents, people were given hope after hearing the rehabilitation stories of others. New patients saw that change for their own lives was possible because it was possible for those who had already been through the recovery process. SHG members at Parivartan, Community Action, and TFG Trust also said that the success stories of others in their group or larger communities encouraged them to seek improvement for themselves and their families.

### **The Power of Prayer and Presence**

Although the field research focused on the use of conversation in bringing change, many respondents also spoke about the importance of prayer and the presence of believers in a community. While many secular development practices and models are vital components, one must recognize the central importance of the Church in holistic development efforts. The transformational conversation cycle cannot happen if believers are not a part of the development process (Grigg, 2009). The spiritual component of holistic transformation would be nearly impossible without the Church proclaiming the Good News in both word and deed. In this way, the Church addresses the spiritual roots of a community problem, and provides a solution to human problems by pointing to Jesus.

Without the presence of believers in their communities, many of the community group participants may never have come to know Christ. It was common for believers to share their faith with others, as this is a natural part of a Christian’s life. If group members are experiencing problems, the staff and other believers in the group offer comfort with prayer and the word of God. Every respondent from Sewa Ashram said that they decided to follow Christ after coming to the ashram. The ashram staff and other believers in their Life Groups played a crucial role in this process. At Community Action, paradigm shifts went hand-in-hand with spiritual awakenings. Coming to faith in Jesus marks the point when change began to take place in their lives, as this change in thinking soon led to a change in action.

Having a resident witness to the Gospel is foundational to biblical transformation, and ensures that transformation in a community comes from the inside out (Ponraj, 1993; Woolnough, 2014). When the church is involved or there are believers in the group, personal sharing opens the door to share comforting truths from the Word of God and offer prayer in the name of Jesus. Even though many of the group participants from these organizations were either Hindu or Muslim, they welcomed prayer and guidance from their Christian friends. It is through such means that group participants from Sewa Ashram, Parivartan, and Community Action eventually came to know the Lord.

In every group, discussion leaders reported that prayer fit naturally into their group discussions when members were sharing about their needs, and was incredibly impactful in their lives. Respondents from Parivartan and Community Action said that they saw the prayers of God’s people answered many times. Many of these ladies now pray on a regular basis, and find comfort in prayer when facing difficult circumstances.

Due to the strong influence that relationships have in the transformative process, teaching or leading a group through behavior modelling was a prominent component of these community group conversations. At Emergent, instructors Will and Laurie teach biblical principles by modelling respect, human dignity, and equality in their classroom interactions. Having provided this example, they then require their students to display the same values and behavior in their conversations with each other. The students have taken this past a classroom requirement and applied it to their lives, specifically to how they interact in their homes and workplaces. In a much less formal way, the SHG leaders at Parivartan and Community Action model biblical principles by simply living out their faith. This was modelled through both verbal and nonverbal interactions.

Even when group participants did not come to a saving knowledge of Jesus, their lives were still positively impacted by the presence of believers. The staff from both Community Action and TFG Trust say that because of the love and commitment they have shown to the residents, people know that they can come to the church if they need help, regardless of their religion. The same can be said for each organization. Although the staff would love to see people in these communities come to faith in Jesus, they are committed to serving them regardless of their caste, creed, or religion.

## **Additional Findings**

Along with the four emergent themes discussed above, there were a few additional findings that surfaced in the research process and are worth noting.

### **The Nature of Worldview Change and Lifestyle Transformation**

Both a change in thinking and a change in action are evident in the life of a transformed person. However, it is important to understand that worldview change is a learning process, and takes place over time. The majority of respondents said that shifts in thinking occurred over the course of many conversations rather than immediately. A true change in belief will naturally lead to a change in action, but these lifestyle adjustments often happens very slowly, as a person learns how to apply these new truths to the way he or she lives (Kraft, 1986; Mittwede, 2013).

One thing that the staff at Sewa Ashram continually emphasized was that the process of transformation looks different depending on the person. Different people grow at different speeds. This was evident in every case study. How a person changed depended on many factors – personal history, religious background, family stability and social support, financial strain, and a number of other social and economic circumstances.

Spiritual worldview change was more common among people in desperate situations than it was among people with more stability. At Emergent, the majority of students are financially well-off. Most paradigm shifts that people experienced here were cultural or academic rather than spiritual. Although the students at Emergent were exposed to the Gospel, they did not see a reason to abandon their old belief system. Students frequently experienced raised awareness about community or international issues, but rarely any kind of paradigm shift related to their understanding of God. Any changes that occurred to an individual’s worldview were generally minimal, and always came after a person was exposed to new information (Kraft, 1987). When paradigm shifts occurred, existing worldviews were generally modified (new beliefs were added to an existing worldview) rather than replaced entirely (Hiebert, 2008; Mittwede, 2013).

Cases of spiritual transformation (i.e. conversion to Christianity) were the only situations where holistic transformation of the individual took place. This included every resident from Sewa Ashram that was interviewed, Aarti from the SHG at Parivartan, and Gunasundari from the SHG at Community Action. Each of these respondents seemed to exhibit change in three areas of culture as a result of their spiritual transformation:

* Cognitive (beliefs – head knowledge)
* Affective (feelings – heart and relationship with God)
* Evaluative (norms – lifestyle and decision-making)

[Hiebert, 2008]

In all other instances of lifestyle change, only minor adjustments to a person’s worldview change were made. This brought noticeable improvement to a person’s well-being, but did not result in transformation of the person as a whole.

Although worldview plays a significant role in holistic transformation, individual and community change are not always the result of worldview change. Group participants from multiple locations were able to make changes to their lifestyles when new opportunities and assistance became available to them. Patients at Sewa Ashram were essentially given a second chance at life, as they were given access to medical treatment and other rehabilitative services that they would not have been able to afford otherwise. In the communities where Parivartan, Community Action, and TFG Trust have been working, unwise financial management on behalf of male heads of household was a major contributing factor to the poverty of the family. However, this problem was solved, in part, when women were able access loans by joining an SHG. This opened up new economic opportunities for themselves and their families. Access to free legal resources through TFG Trust also had a significant impact on the way people addressed injustices in their community. In these cases, the issue preventing change in a community was a lack of access rather than a lack of desire to change.

### **Lack of Intentional Worldview Examination**

The transformation of individuals was heavily influenced by the development approach of the organization working with them. Each organization took a different approach to worldview change depending on their focus and social restrictions. Sewa Ashram focused heavily on the need for spiritual healing, and was the only organization which focused on examining deep worldview issues that prevent progress. The staff at Emergent also has less freedom to talk about religion (and Christianity specifically), which meant that worldview discussion related to spirituality was limited. In the SHGs at Parivartan, Community Action, and TFG Trust, the primary purpose of group meetings was practical community change, but addressing worldview issues was commonly only a byproduct of the larger conversation on strategic planning.

Unlike the UNDP’s Community Conversations initiative, the community groups in Delhi did not seem to actively promote critical thinking and asset-based community development (Campbell et al, 2013). Critical thinking did happen in these groups in the midst of community problem solving, but it was more of a byproduct of conversation, stemming from the nature of problem solving itself. Emphasizing and building critical thinking skills could make conversation a much more effective tool in worldview change if it were intentionally included in the conversational format. Including an asset-based approach to community development could also turn the community conversation from negative to positive, identifying what a community currently has to offer as well as what it is lacking.

### **Lack of Reproducible Movements**

None of the organizations appeared to be experiencing any kind of multiplicative movements of transformation. Community Action was the only organization that provided any kind of information regarding how community groups multiply. When other ladies outside the current groups ask for money, Community Action starts a new group to accommodate them. People in the community hear about the changes that current group members have experienced and want to join the group to experience these changes in their own lives. Although two new SHGs have been added at Community Action since 2009, the decision to start each of these new groups was made by the NGO’s founder rather than the community members themselves. There does not appear to be any kind of natural, community-led movement connected to the multiplication of these groups.

Storytelling, whether biblical or personal, was present in every conversation group. However, while biblical storytelling is known to be an easily replicable teaching method (Davis, 2012; Patterson & Scoggins, 1993), none of the organizations seemed to embrace a model of storytelling that was intentionally reproducible. Although Sewa Ashram encourages storytelling as a central part of their Life Group sessions, there is no set curriculum for biblical storytelling because the stories told are decided upon by the individuals in the group.

## **Revised Theory**

Based on the findings mentioned above, it appears that conversation can be an impactful tool for worldview change and lifestyle transformation. Lives must be changed at the motivational level if community change is to be embraced and sustained, and spiritual root issues that prevent progress must be intentionally addressed. However, while conversation is beneficial for worldview change, community collaboration, and political organizing, it is not sufficient on its own to bring about widespread change in communities. Many times, social or economic barriers exist that prevent people from fully acting on a worldview change they have had. Change must be sought in the hearts and minds of individuals, but community plans must also address largely systemic issues that prevent progress.

# **Chapter 6**

# **Conclusion**

As evidenced by both the literature and the case studies in Delhi, conversation is a beneficial tool in development work. Conversation allows community members to be directly involved in the community development process, resulting in solutions of which the community can take ownership. Examining a problem in a group also opens up an exchange of ideas and exposes people to new information, which has the potential to promote worldview change. Only when a change in thinking has taken place can there be a true and lasting change in behavior. This is ultimately what brings about community transformation and what makes development sustainable.

In the spirit of the transformational conversation model, a list of basic recommendations has been developed for community groups, specifically those which use discussion as a major component in the community development process. Other small group dynamics that respondents identified as effective elements in producing worldview change and lifestyle transformation have also been included.

## **Recommendations for Conversation-Based Community Groups**

* Groups should consist of six to ten people.
* Group facilitators should be community members or from similar backgrounds as group participants.
  + Having a similar history to the group participants gives the facilitator the motivation to push forward, even when struggles come.
  + The group facilitator should be someone who is well-respected, and exhibits behavior worth modelling.
* Sharing the Gospel must be done in a balanced and practical way. It should address the needs of the whole person, not just his or her spiritual needs.
  + When possible, a faith-based NGO should partner with a local church. This will allow the NGO to focus on the social and economic needs of a community as the church cares for the spiritual needs of the people.
* Storytelling should be a key component of the conversational model.
* Education and exposure to new information is key to the process of worldview change.
* Teaching methods should be simple enough that they can easily be taught and shared with others in the community.
  + This is how movements begin, and transformation is able to extend past the original group.
* Goal setting can help in the creation of action plans.

The researcher hopes that these recommendations will be helpful for Delhi House Society as they attempt to develop Life Groups in other communities where they are working, such as Meena Bazaar. Although the Life Groups at Sewa Ashram seem to be functional and fairly effective for the men in recovery, it is a model that was specifically designed for the very structured and insulated environment of the ashram. This list of recommendations is general enough that it can be applied to nearly any context. These recommendations can also be used by other organizations that are looking to integrate conversation into the community development process.

## **Areas for Future Research**

Although a great deal of field data was gathered on conversation and small group dynamics, very little was uncovered about how these practices are being multiplied to create a reproducible movement. More specifically, this research failed to find significant instances of faith movements occurring through these community groups. Even in cases where multiple people in a community group began following Jesus, there was no clear indication that these individual faith decisions were producing a multiplying faith movement. The researcher should have asked respondents more questions about the structure of these organizations and the multiplication of their efforts along with personal stories of transformation. Future research should be done to explore these topics further.

Specific paradigm shifts and lifestyle changes were recorded, but little was found about the process by which worldview change occurred. Because past knowledge and experiences play a role in how people understand and interact with the world, questions were asked about how the respondent’s background influenced how they interacted in the group. However, this unfortunately failed to uncover how their previous views may have shaped any new beliefs that were added to their worldviews.

Due to the relatively short time period that the researcher had, time spent observing group dynamics was also limited. The researcher relied primarily on interview accounts to gather information on instances of transformation. In the future, a longitudinal study may be beneficial, as it will allow researchers to document the circumstances accompanying inward and outward changes as they occur.

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# **Appendix A**

# **Interview Questions**

**Transformative Power of Conversations:**

**Worldview Change through Community Groups in Delhi**

Principal Investigator: Valerie Alms

**Interview Questions**

***For Group Facilitators:***

* How would you define your role in the group (i.e., title, level of participation, responsibilities, etc.)?
* What would you say is the purpose of this community group?
* In what ways is the purpose of this group carried out (group format, lesson or discussion content, etc.)?
* With which religion or belief system do you identify? What is the religion of the majority of the group members?
* How has your background (such as your religious beliefs) impacted the way you engage group members, and how they engage with you?
  + How has it influenced how you view community transformation?
  + How have the beliefs of the group members influenced how they participate in the group? How they view community transformation?
  + How involved are you with the families of the participants?
* What role do discussion or interactive conversations play in the group meetings? Have you found this to be effective?
* How has the use of discussion or conversations led to paradigm shifts or the acceptance of new ideas among the participants? In the community as a whole?
  + What role do faith and religion play in this dialogue?
  + How have participants reacted to biblical principles and stories about Jesus?
* What are some specific issues facing this community?
  + What are community members doing to address these issues?
  + Is the group involved in trying to address these issues?
  + Are there any religious groups or organizations which are trying to address these issues?
* How have you seen the community change since the group started?
  + Have you seen specific people in the community whose lives have changed as a result of the group?
  + How has the community become empowered as a result of this group?
* Is there anything else you would like to share about yourself, the group, or your community that you think would help the researcher understand group dynamics and their impact on personal or community transformation?

**Transformative Power of Conversations:**

**Worldview Change through Community Groups in Delhi**

Principal Investigator: Valerie Alms

**Interview Questions**

***For Group Participants:***

* How would you define your role in the group (i.e., title, level of participation, responsibilities, etc.)?
* How has your background (such as your religious beliefs) impacted the way you participate in the group?
  + Are there any other factors that have impacted your participation in either the group or the community?
* How has your involvement in the group influenced any of the following?
  + Your worldview and lifestyle practices
  + The thought process by which you make personal decisions (Decisions about your family? Decisions related to involvement in your community?)
  + How you communicate with others
  + Cooperation with your fellow community members
* How has your involvement in the group impacted your family members?
* What are some specific issues facing this community?
  + What are community members doing to address these issues?
  + Is the group involved in trying to address these issues?
  + Are there any religious groups or organizations which are trying to address these issues?
* How have you seen the community change since the group started? Have you seen specific people in the community whose lives have changed as a result of the group?
* How have you personally changed as a result of being involved in this group?
* Is there anything else you would like to share about yourself, the group, or your community that you think would help the researcher understand group dynamics and their impact on personal or community transformation?