Learning to Listen

THE FIRST RACIALLY INTEGRATED BRANCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Tears gathered in 56-year-old Frans Lekqwati's eyes as he sat across from Olev Taim, his stake president. President Taim had just asked him what he thought about creating a branch of the Church in Frans's hometown of Soweto, South Africa.

Above: A beach is designated as a whites-only area under strict apartheid practices in South Africa.
Right: A 1952 protest in Johannesburg calling for freedom and equality.

"Why are you crying? Did I offend you?" asked President Taim.

"No," Frans responded. "This is the first time in South Africa that a white man has asked me my opinion before making a decision."

Life under Apartheid

The year was 1981. At the time, black and white people in South Africa were segregated under a system of laws known as apartheid. This legal separation, together with the Church's restriction preventing black African men

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South Africa's first black Relief Society president, Julia Mavimbela, participates in the groundbreaking for the new Soweto Branch building in 1991. (See her story in the following article.)

from being ordained to the priesthood, had long meant that the Church could not thrive among black South Africans. A new day dawned in 1978 when President Spencer W. Kimball received the revelation that lifted the priesthood restriction, but the challenges of segregation and a culture of suspicion between races remained.

The vast majority of black South Africans lived in townships, usually built on the outskirts of predominantly white cities such as Johannesburg. Soweto, short for South Western Townships, was the largest. White people rarely went to the townships, and black people who went to the cities were rarely treated as equals with the whites.

Frans and his family were part of a small group from Soweto who had embraced the restored gospel during the 1970s. At first they attended the Johannesburg Ward. Frans's son Jonas remembered getting up on Sundays at 4:00 a.m. so the family could catch an early train into Johannesburg and then make the long walk to the chapel before the services started at 9:00 a.m. The family was always early—though sometimes it was difficult for the children to stay awake through Primary!

"We may not have agreed on things that were happening outside church, . . . but we agreed on the doctrine."

Being a pioneer of racial integration could also be an emotional challenge. Josiah Mohapi remembered overhearing a six-year-old white boy say something offensive about the black people he encountered at church. "To be honest, I became hot under the collar," Josiah recalled. But then he heard the mother tell her son, "The Church is for everybody." Comforted by the reminder, Josiah cooled down.

A Branch in Soweto?

President Taim was aware of the physical and emotional challenges black members faced. He considered starting a branch in Soweto to make travel easier for them but did not want to make them feel as if they were unwelcome in Johannesburg. He decided to interview Soweto members like Frans to gauge their feelings before taking any action. They gave him a clear answer: "We would love to establish the Church in Soweto."

President Taim identified experienced leaders who could help mentor recent converts. He interviewed over 200 members in Johannesburg and ultimately called 40 to join the new branch long enough to help train a pioneering group of local leaders there.

BOTTOM LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH FROM KEYSTONE/GETTY IMAGES
BOTTOM RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPH FROM POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

Just as black members had crossed into another part of town and another culture to attend the Johannesburg Ward, white members had to adjust to a new environment and culture as they served in Soweto. Things did not always go smoothly. Maureen van Zyl, a white member who had been called to serve as Primary president, thought nothing of it when the South African national anthem of the time was chosen as the opening song in Relief Society meeting one week. She soon learned, however, that black South Africans viewed the anthem as a symbol of apartheid and that many black sisters were offended by the choice of song.

"We can only change perception through experiences. We all needed these lived experiences that caused us to change."

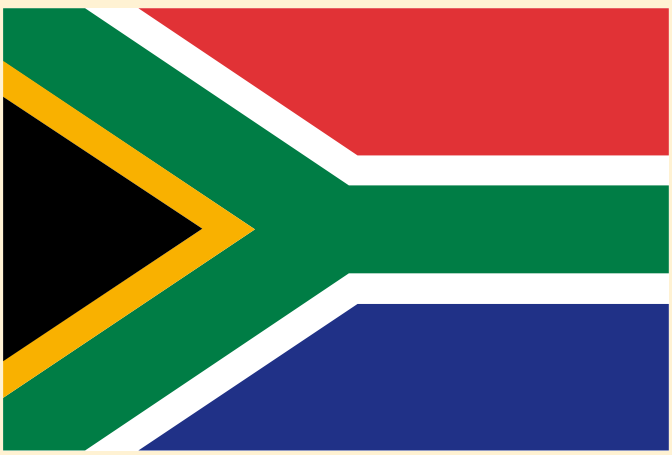
Black and white members alike could easily have become discouraged by such misunderstandings, but they chose to see them as an opportunity for discussion and improvement instead. "We shared all sorts of things," Maureen remembered. "As blacks, what would be offensive and as whites, what we'd find offensive. How they did certain things and how we did certain things. And so it was just this wonderful time of learning together."

As the branch in Soweto grew stronger and larger, branches were started in other townships using the same model. Khumbulani Mdletshe was a young man living in the KwaMashu township near Durban. When he joined the Church in 1980, he brought with him suspicions of white people common to almost all young black men in South Africa at that time. But his experiences worshipping in an integrated branch changed his perspective.

The Glue That Binds People Together

In 1982, Khumbulani and several other young men in his branch were invited to attend a young single adult conference. His branch president, a white brother named John Mountford, wanted the young men to look their best, though few of them had nice clothing. He emptied his closet, distributing suits to the young men, who wore them to the conference. The next Sunday, President Mountford wore the suit he had loaned to Khumbulani. "I could not imagine a white person wearing the same clothes that have been worn by me," Khumbulani recalled, "but there he was. He began to help me see white people differently than I've ever seen them before."

Now an Area Seventy, Elder Mdletshe observed, "We all needed these lived experiences that caused us to change."



The flag of South Africa was adopted in 1994 as a post-apartheid symbol of unity. The black, yellow, and green represent the African National Congress, and the red, white, and blue represent the Boer Republics.

PHOTOGRAPH OF THE JOHANNESBURG SOUTH AFRICA TEMPLE

Apartheid in South Africa ended in 1994. While many congregations today exist in mostly black or mostly white areas, the greater freedom means that an increasing number of areas are mixed. Like the pioneers of the first branches in the townships, members with different backgrounds worship and work together to build up the kingdom of God.

The current Soweto stake president, Thabo Lebethoa, describes the gospel as glue that binds people together in times of division. "We may not have agreed on things that were happening outside church, with politics and other things," he observed, "but we agreed on the doctrine." Working from that shared foundation, people can learn from each other's differences as they counsel carefully and listen with spiritual sensitivity. "One of the most important things about leadership is to listen to people," President Lebethoa advises. "Listen so that you can understand. Listen so that you can feel. Listen so that you can receive inspiration."

Thoba Karl-Halla, the daughter of early Soweto Branch member Julia Mavimbela, agrees that listening helps keep inevitable friction from turning into painful division. "I should listen with an ear that would make me understand the frustrations of the person who might probably come out as an offender to me," she says.

Elder Mdletshe urges South African Saints today to find strength in their diversity, especially in council settings. "The Lord would have liked that," he observes, "to have people from all walks of life sit around the table and talk about the issues." His call to local leaders throughout the Church is to continue to build up leaders from different backgrounds, just as a past generation supported him. When trying to reach new areas and new groups, he notes, "you're not going to find experienced people. But you build experiences in the Church. You build experiences by bringing people right into the center and having them work together." ■

Quotations come from interviews conducted by the Church History Department in 2015. An inspiring video featuring some of these interviews can be found at **lds.org/go/soweto.**

Healing the Beloved Country: The Faith of Julia Mavimbela

By Matthew K. Heiss
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Julia met and married John in 1946.

Julia Mavimbela's life suddenly changed in 1955 when her husband, John, was killed in an automobile accident. Evidence at the scene suggested that the other person involved, a white man, had veered into John's lane. Yet that man was not ruled at fault. Rather, white police officers said that blacks are poor drivers, so John was responsible for the crash.[1]

Julia was 37 years old with four children and another on the way. She had been wronged by racism, the police, and the justice system. Yet she eventually learned not to give in to bitterness; rather, she spent her life striving to be healed and to heal her beloved country through Christlike service. It was her love of the land, her faith in God, and her dedication to living by her faith's principles that made this possible.

Julia was born in 1917, the last of five children. Her father passed away when Julia was five years old. Her mother was left to raise the children on her own, finding work as a washerwoman and a domestic worker.

Julia's mother was a religious woman who taught her children from the Bible. "My mother had taught me to swallow the bitter pills of life and encouraged me never to look back but to look ahead," Julia said. Julia's mother also understood the importance of education and did all she could with her limited means to see that her children received formal schooling.

Julia received more training and education and worked as a teacher and school principal until she met and married John Mavimbela in 1946. John owned a grocery and butcher shop. Julia gave up her career to work there. Together they built a home and had children. Despite the restrictions of apartheid, life was good. However, that all changed with John's death.

On her husband's tombstone, Julia inscribed these words:

In loving memory of
John Phillip Corlie Mavimbela.
By his wife and relatives.
But the lump remains.
May his soul rest in peace.

Describing the fourth line, Julia said, "At the time of writing, the lump that remained was one of hatred and bitterness—for the man who caused the accident, for the policemen who lied, [and] for the court who deemed my husband responsible for the accident that took his life."[2] One of her greatest trials was to overcome this bitterness and anger.

Shortly after the death of her husband, in a night of "troubled sleep," Julia had a dream in which John appeared to her, handed her some overalls, and said, "Go to work." Describing the result of this dream, she said, "I found a way of getting myself away from the worries of these years, and that was through community involvement."

Twenty years later, in the mid-1970s, the blacks' reaction to apartheid had gone from peaceful protests to violent outbursts. One of the flash points for the violence was Soweto, where Julia was living. She said, "Soweto became unlike any place we had known—it was as if we were in a battlefield."

Julia feared that her wound of bitterness would reopen: "It had been over

Below: During apartheid, Julia started a community garden to teach children that "all is not lost."
Right: Julia in her native Zulu dress and serving in the Johannesburg South Africa Temple.

Watch a video about the life of Julia Mavimbela that includes interviews with two of her children and others who knew her: **lds.org/go/julia.**

20 years since John's death, but I could still feel the pain of that time." In an effort to seek healing, both for herself and for her people, Julia thought, "Perhaps if I can teach the children to love working in the soil, all is not lost." She established a community garden that symbolized hope to people who knew only fear and anger.

As she worked with the children in her community garden, she would teach them: "Let us dig the soil of bitterness, throw in a seed of love, and see what fruits it can give us. . . . Love will not come without forgiving others."

She said, "I knew deep in my heart I was breaking up the soil of my own bitterness as I forgave those who had hurt me." The lump of bitterness that remained after John's death started to dissolve.

In 1981, Julia was introduced to the Church. The missionaries, performing community service in Soweto, found a boys' center in desperate need of repair. For several weeks they cleaned up the premises.[3]

One day, Julia was asked to serve at that same boys' club. When she arrived, she was astonished to see "two white boys hurling their spades into the brown dust." The missionaries asked if they could come to her home and deliver a message. Three days later, Elders David McCombs and Joel Heaton showed up wearing their missionary attire and name tags.

Julia said that the first two missionary lessons "went in one ear and out the other." But on their third visit, the missionaries asked about a photograph of Julia and John on her wall. She mentioned that her husband was dead, and the missionaries felt prompted to tell her about the plan of salvation and baptism for the dead. She said, "Then I started listening, really listening, with my heart. . . . As the missionaries taught me the principle of eternal relationships, I had the feeling that here is the way to be with my parents and my husband." Julia was baptized five months later.

A month after her baptism, Julia spoke at stake conference. "When I walked to the podium," she said, "I think most everybody was shocked. It was their first time seeing a black person speaking at conference—maybe for some of them the first time ever to hear a black person address an audience." She felt prompted to talk about her husband's death and the years of difficulty she had. She described her bitterness and how she "had finally found the church that could teach me to truly forgive."

Her struggles with misunderstanding and prejudice, however, were not over, even after apartheid ended in 1994.

Elder Dale G. Renlund of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, in his April 2015 general conference talk, "Latter-day Saints Keep on Trying," told of an incident Julia and her daughter Thoba experienced when they "were treated less than kindly by some white members." Thoba complained about their treatment. What could have easily become an excuse to leave the Church became a priceless teaching moment. Julia replied, "Oh, Thoba, the Church is like a big hospital, and we are all sick in our own way. We come to church to be helped."[4]

Julia discovered that healing was possible through the gospel of Jesus Christ, not only for herself but also for her nation. Her service in the Johannesburg South Africa Temple taught her that in the temple, "there is no touch of Afrikaner. There is no English. There is no Situ nor Zulu. You know that feeling of oneness."

Julia Mavimbela died on July 16, 2000. ■

NOTES

1. Except as noted, accounts and quotations come from Laura Harper, "'Mother of Soweto': Julia Mavimbela, Apartheid Peace-Maker and Latter-day Saint," unpublished manuscript, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
2. In the Harper text, the word *lamp* is used instead of *lump*. However, Julia's daughter Thoba confirmed that the word inscribed on the grave marker was *lump*.
3. From David Lawrence McCombs, interview with author, Aug. 25, 2015.
4. Dale G. Renlund, "Latter-day Saints Keep on Trying," *Ensign,* May 2015, 57.

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PHOTOGRAPH OF JULIA AS TEMPLE WORKER COURTESY OF CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY