

Healing the Beloved Country: The Faith of Julia Mavimbela

By Matthew K. Heiss
Church History Department

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



Julia met and married John in 1946.

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

