

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.

"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."



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.

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



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

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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!

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.



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.)

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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

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

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.

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.



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.