

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> 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.**



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.<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup>

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, 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, 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 or Liahona*, May 2015, 57.