

IN A HOUSE WITH NO CORNERS

By The Reverend Jamie Hamilton



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The Reverend Jamie Hamilton, chair of the religion department and Academy's Bicentennial Instructor, spent the fall term on sabbatical, traveling with her family in Africa and Asia. She sent the following report from KwaZulu, Natal, in South Africa, where they visited the Reverend Gideon Khabela, who served as the Academy's Thurgood Marshall Fellow from 2000 to 2003.

We have just returned from Pholela, the home of Gideon's parish, which includes 25 "outstations"—rural villages scattered among the hills of the Drakensberg Mountains, along the border of Lesotho. The parishioners of these villages also belong to the Pholela Church and Gideon is their minister, their *umfundisi*. It's amazing to watch him minister to all these different people, all with different needs. He reaches some of the villages by horseback.

Today, his six-passenger truck is sufficient to carry us to meet Johannes Mbanjwa, an elder of the Pholela Church. Now in his 90s, he has been a pillar of the church, a wise council, a committed friend and a prayerful leader.

Mr. Mbanjwa had called Gideon with serious news: that he was soon going to part from this world to meet his friends in the other world, and that he wanted his "son" to bring him his last communion. And so we arrive bearing wine and bread and our prayer books. Mr. Mbanjwa's home is simple—just three round huts constructed out of mud bricks, covered with mud and plaster, and then topped with thatched roofs. We are greeted by 20 congregants who will also take part in this special service: to honor a man's life and the many gifts of love and power that he shared with his community.

The service began, as always, with song. Zulu sung is beautiful. The voices are clear and pure; the beat is created by slapping prayer books. And then the harmony begins. There are no musical instruments, just one leader, a woman in her 70s named Ms. Poswa, setting the tone.

Gideon speaks about Johannes' long life: about how his spirit of faith has moved so many people and how his influence will con-

tinue even when he joins the ancestors. We share communion, and then Ms. Poswa breaks into Zulu dance. She rocks and sways and jumps, landing on her knees, only to spring back up with incredible grace and dexterity.

As she dances, the other women continue to sing and pray. They are dressed in black skirts and white shirts, and all wear hats—black if they are married, white if they are single. The uniformity of their movements and song and prayer is such a living witness to community that we are no longer individuals praying for a man. We are the village. Time and distance and boundaries break down. It even feels like you who are reading this piece that I am writing now are praying for him. What a way to mark our passage into the life with the Divine.

After the dance, Johannes' wife brings Gideon a gift—a place setting for Gideon's wife, Nomsa, plus 20 rand for Gideon. Gideon accepts the payment, but we can see how difficult it is for him to do so, knowing the Mbanjwas have so little and have given so much. He is speechless in his thanks.

After the benediction, six plates of steaming food are placed in front of us: lunch for the honored guests. We are hungry and the chicken and rice is delicious. As we eat, we all mention how comfortable it is to be in a house with no corners. The early missionaries told the Zulus to abandon the round house; only square houses could be Christian homes. The Zulus could not understand. Everything is round, they said: the sun, the moon, the life cycle, the alpha and the omega. Why have lines and angles? It makes no sense. We agree.

Later, I ask Gideon why there are so many bones placed over the entrance to the Mbanjwas' home. "They are sacrifices made to honor the different religious occasions," he explains. "They stay above the door as a reminder—a living history of the family's religious journey."

Our journey into this home will always be remembered. We wonder how we should mark it. ●