

Faith Matters: Brother Terence's service to all God's children

By David Waters

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The railroad tracks that brought Terence McLaughlin to Memphis in 1949 still form the northern border of Christian Brothers University, where he will be honored today for his more than seven decades of service as a Christian, a Brother and a pioneering educator.

“This building was under construction the day I got to Memphis. I saw it from the train and wondered if this was the campus,” Brother Terence said as he sat in a wood-paneled board room in Barry Hall, named for the businessman who helped the college acquire its property on East Parkway in 1940.

That’s the same year Brother Terence entered the order of De La Salle Christian Brothers. Their mission for nearly 400 years has been “to provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry entrusted to them by the church.”

Barry Hall, CBU’s administration building, opened in 1950, a year after Brother Terence arrived on the L&N Railroad, entrusted with teaching religion and ethics to the all-white student body at Christian Brothers College.

“It was my first experience with segregation,” said Brother Terence, who grew up in Duluth, Minn., the son of a Scottish father and an Irish mother. “But we never spoke of it. There were just two sets of people living in the same space but in completely different worlds. I don’t know why we didn’t talk about it. It was just the way it was.”

That wasn’t the way it was in 1962, when Brother Terence — who’d left in 1953 to teach elsewhere — returned to Barry Hall as the new president of Christian Brothers. That was the same year Allegra Turner filled out an application for her son, Jesse Turner Jr., an African-American student at St. Augustine School, to enroll at Christian Brothers High School the following year.

Turner’s enrollment would make Christian Brothers the first integrated high school in Memphis.

“I saw no problem whatsoever,” said Brother Terence, who had worked at a Chicago school in the 1940s, under Cardinal Stritch, a former Memphis priest who urged all of

his principals to open their doors to any black student who applied. "That was in the '40s, and here it was the '60s. I figured we were past all that."

We weren't. Brother Terence accepted Turner's application for the fall of 1963. Meanwhile, Bishop William Adrian, whose office was in Nashville, announced that all Catholic schools in the state would begin integrating that fall, but only grades 1-4. High schools would have to wait a few years.

Brother Terence told the bishop the good news: He didn't have to wait. "I thought I was throwing a key block for him, helping him out by letting him know that our school was already being integrated," Brother Terence said. "I was shocked by his response."

On May 22, 1963, Bishop Adrian wrote a letter to Brother Terence: "It seems unfortunate that you should have taken this step to register a negro student for your high school without first consulting the Diocesan superintendent of our Catholic schools. This can be a cause for much trouble."

The bishop, who signed the letter "Yours in Christ," said he would submit the matter to Supt. Elliott. Three days later, Brother Terence got a handwritten letter from Elliott. "It would be contrary to the plan adopted by the Bishop," he wrote, "for CBHS to accept a colored student at this time." He signed the letter "Sincerely yours in Christ."

CBHS, though in Christ, was not technically in the diocese. The Turners were not easily turned away, and Brother Terence declined to do so. The bishop relented. Jesse Turner Jr. entered CBHS on Aug. 22, 1963, two days before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington.

"He paid a price for it. He was pressured out of Memphis because of it," said Monsignor Val Handwerker, a CBHS student at the time. "But he's a humble man, a true Christian Brother, and he's been a real model to me."

Brother Terence said he believes Bishop Adrian was just trying to avoid trouble.

"The bishop saw the Turners as people threatening to use their NAACP clout," he said. "I saw a Catholic family trying to get their son to a good school like anyone else. At first it was just an administrative issue, but it became a moral one for me."

Education always has been a moral and a biblical issue for the Christian Brothers, founded by St. John Baptist de la Salle, a 17th century French priest and education reformer, now also known as the patron saint of teachers.

"De la Salle established the first schools for the poor, the first Catholic schools," Brother Terence said. "He taught the Brothers to see all children as children of God."

Brother Terence, who returned to Memphis a third time in 2000, is proud of how far CBU has come in the past 40 years in educating all God's children. A third of the student body is African-American, and first-generation. About 40 percent of the students on campus are eligible for Pell grants.

“Brother Terence is a pioneer in our efforts to diversify the campus,” said Dr. John Smarrelli, CBU’s president. “We wouldn’t be where we are today without his courage and compassion.”

These days, Brother Terence spends much of his time working with Lasallian Volunteers, recent college graduates who come to Memphis to spend a year or two working at De La Salle Blessed Sacrament Elementary, a Jubilee school in Binghamton.

This school year’s three volunteers all live on campus and have dinner with the Brothers. They read to the kids at De La Salle, eat lunch with them, help them with their homework. They also provide art, music and computer classes for them.

“They bring an energy, a passion for service, that is essential for what we’re trying to do for the children,” said principal Daniel Salvaggio, who himself was a Lasallian Volunteer.

The Lasallian program pays the Volunteers a small stipend. The Brothers offer them a chance to earn a tuition-free master’s degree for their service. They also get the benefit of Brother Terence’s 92 years of life experience.

“I’m getting up there,” said the lanky 6-foot-2 Brother, who seems to be getting taller, people tell him, as he grows older. But he wasn’t talking about his height.

“I had hoped to live long enough to see all of God’s children getting the education they need and deserve. That hasn’t happened yet.

“We no longer have a two-school system in Memphis, by law, but our schools still remain segregated by race, by neighborhood, by choice. That’s our choice, not God’s choice.”

Dozier Award

WHO: Brother Terence McLaughlin, CBU president form 1962-1964.

WHAT: He will be honored with the Bishop Carroll T. Dozier Award for Peace and Justice, named for the first bishop of the Diocese of Memphis.

WHEN: 6 p.m. today

WHERE: Hilton Memphis



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