

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SERVICE

By A. James Fuller and Rebecca Blair '80



Robert McBride '48

Dr. Robert McBride has inspired several generations of students, especially student athletes, as he personifies a man who not only excels at sports, but who is also an intellectual and a scholar. In his years as a college professor and administrator, he lived a life of service in which he not only provided immediate help to those around him, but through his students, influenced the lives of countless others who have never met him.

Born and raised in Washington, Indiana, McBride came to Indiana Central College because of the persistent encouragement from President I. J. Good. On one of his many journeys to promote the school, Dr. Good came to visit the church where the McBride family attended, and was invited to their home for dinner. In the course of the meal and the conversation over it, the college president looked over at young Bob and said, "You're going to Indiana Central College." With his family's support and the church connection added to the president's prophetic statement, the young man came to campus to start college in 1942.

As a result of his pastor's influence, McBride began a course in pre-theological studies. But during his first year, Bob was drafted for military service in World War II, serving in the 17th Airborne Division as a staff sergeant in a medical squad. He experienced lots of intense combat, including the Battle of the Bulge in December of 1944. Although he wasn't really aware of it at the time, McBride now views his military service as a part of service to others. Like most people at the time, he believed that serving in the Army was just something that had to be done; it was his duty rather than an honorable act of service. But he grew quite sensitive to the casualties, especially in his role in the medical squad, and his efforts surely helped those in need. Honorably discharged in December 1945, he returned to Indiana Central and his college career.

Now married, the young man had to choose between athletic and academic endeavors as he focused on his future career in earnest. Always interested in athletics, McBride was talented enough to play several sports in school, including baseball and football. He was especially good at baseball. So good, in fact, that, just after the war, he was offered the chance to try out for the major leagues. Although he did not especially feel a call to the ministry, he decided to turn down the baseball offers and returned to his theology studies. Bob found campus life comfortable and enjoyed the benefits of going to a small school. "You got a lot of attention" from the professors, he recalls, and he found it easy to talk to his teachers. The college also exposed him to an "appreciation of friendships and a pursuit of values that was very important."

McBride continued to work toward the ministry as his studies progressed. In his senior year at Indiana Central, he served as pastor of the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Freetown, Indiana. He continued to play football as well, garnering a bit of publicity in the newspapers. Some of his parishioners didn't think it proper that a minister should play football, and they let their opinions be known. McBride was given the cold shoulder and worried about what to do. Then, late one night, the congregant who led those opposed to his playing



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football came to McBride's door. The man's wife, a large woman, had fallen out of bed. She was unable to rise and her husband could not lift her. In desperation, he visited the young preacher's room and asked for his help, since McBride was the only man he knew who might be strong enough to lift her. Suddenly, those who had opposed him were now counted among the football-playing pastor's supporters.

After graduating from Indiana Central in 1948, the young theology student followed EUB tradition, attending Bonebrake Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, an experience he found disappointing. Intellectually inclined by nature, McBride struggled with the "assumptions of the church" and "wrestled with questions of philosophy and theology." His questions were sincere and so deeply seated in his intellect as well as his faith that his seminary professors encouraged him to go to graduate school to continue his intellectual pursuits. And so, he gave up seminary and went off to the University of Chicago. There, he preached at a small church just outside of the city

while he studied for an advanced degree. He eventually earned his PhD in philosophy, but even before he was finished, the Evangelical United Brethren denomination asked him to take the pulpit at the University Heights Church. He declined the appointment, deciding to go into higher education instead. Two or three months later, Dr. I. Lynd Esch, president of the College, called to offer him a job at Indiana Central, where he came to teach in 1952.

Working as a professor at his alma mater proved to be a positive experience for Robert McBride. His friendship with sociology professor Marvin Henricks constituted one of the best aspects of the position. They worked closely together on a number of projects, including organizing the Senior Colloquium, a voluntary, no-credit class that offered students a chance to coalesce their academic experience, a valuable learning exercise for both of the professors as well as their pupils. Moreover, McBride founded a faculty book discussion group that cemented many other close friendships with faculty colleagues. He liked the Central tradition



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of professors being open to students and joined them in being a dedicated teacher. With Henricks, McBride later organized the Philosophy Club, which met once a week and allowed him to work closely with many of the best students at the school. The organization was student-led and often met in the basement of the McBride home. Former student Gene Lausch (see pp. 74–77) remembers those meetings fondly and points to discussions about great books and major philosophical issues in McBride’s basement as formative times for him. At the outset, McBride perceived teaching as a service and worked to be “student-centered from the beginning” of his career. He enjoyed thinking with students and sometimes supervised special seminars for the best and the brightest among them.

Service to students included more than teaching classes, grading papers, and advising campus organizations. It also involved helping them to find employment or to continue their studies in graduate school. McBride enjoyed the process, often writing letters of recommendation, making telephone calls, and calling upon professional connections to place students into graduate programs. One example of such a student was Larry Miller, a young man whom McBride helped to win a Woodrow Wilson Scholarship, a prestigious award for which Miller was initially turned down. McBride was convinced that the decision had been made perfunctorily, on the basis that the committee had not heard of Indiana Central College. Disappointed that one

of the best students he’d known had been rejected in such a manner, he wrote a letter to the committee expressing his sentiments. Miller soon received a call from the Wilson Scholarship committee informing him that they had reversed their decision because of McBride’s letter. In addition to helping his students enter graduate schools around the country, McBride also joined President Esch in creating a graduate program in education at the college itself. He worked diligently to set up programs that would fit the school and benefit the community, which meant small programs stressing moral, social, and educational values.

After teaching at Central for twelve years, McBride left in 1963 to take the position of academic dean at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania. His decision was motivated in part by finances. The college did not pay enough for him to provide the kind of education for his children that he hoped they would have. By the early 1960s, he was searching for another position. After consideration of several possibilities that ultimately didn’t work out, including an offer at Otterbein College that his family rejected, the deanship at Albright proved too alluring. McBride served there as academic dean for sixteen years.

Most notably, his tenure included the years of turmoil that marked the decade of the 1960s. Student rebellion was common across the country, as young people organized to promote their idealistic views of the world and work for social justice issues such as Civil Rights while oppos-

ing the Vietnam War. The last few years of the decade and the early years of the 1970s brought the counterculture, with its rebellion against traditional modes of behavior. In sum, the sixties generation meant lots of headaches for a college administrator, and indeed, McBride struggled with many of these issues on Albright’s campus. He worked closely with African Americans on campus who were involved locally in the Civil Rights Movement, with students opposed to the Vietnam War, and with gay students involved in the beginning of the gay rights movement. Moreover, he found himself dealing with students active in the sexual revolution and others whose rebellion led them to the use of drugs.

Albright, a small United Methodist college, did not have the same kinds of student revolts that larger institutions experienced. Yet there were many difficulties for McBride to face head-on. On one occasion, students protesting the college’s refusal to allow cigarette machines on campus planned to take over the library to stage a sit-in, a commonly used tactic in the counter-cultural battle against authority. McBride took fifteen of the student rebels aside and sat down with them to discuss their grievances. As he suspected, they harbored many more complaints than just the lack of cigarette machines. They were upset about a whole range of issues, many of which were occurring at the national level and about which Albright College could do nothing. Nevertheless, McBride patiently listened to them, discussing the issues until four o’clock in the morning. The group eventually reached a

compromise, averting the looming crisis. At the end of the year, the student body presented Dean McBride with an award for working with them in that situation.

His experiences at Albright and his background at Indiana Central helped prepare McBride for his own future as a senior college administrator. In 1979, he moved to Simpson College, a small United Methodist institution in Iowa, to serve as college president. The selection process included candidate interviews with members of the student body, who expressed special interest in how candidates for the presidency would relate to the students. They were worried about the major issues of the day and, since Iowa was slightly behind Pennsylvania in student activism, McBride's experiences at Albright informed his answers. Their questions included the issue of race on campus, as one black student involved in the hiring process asked about how he might handle difficulties that were sure to arise. He remembers that his manner and answers to their questions showed the students and faculty alike that "administrators could be human beings."

Beyond student issues, Simpson was mired in financial crisis. After his installation as president, McBride set out to improve the school economically. There was a large deficit to be erased; faculty members were upset about low pay and worried about the future of the institution. With careful and creative management, McBride stabilized the college's economic situation, paying off the debt and endeavoring to raise faculty salaries up to par with other schools of similar size in the state.

As the financial situation improved, so did student performance, and Simpson began to move steadily up the academic rankings. To maintain this level of achievement, McBride sought to improve the quality of the faculty, often a difficult administrative task. Of necessity, those faculty whose work demonstrated their incompetence simply had to go. The college president was careful to include the faculty in the process, removing several professors whose work proved unacceptable and replacing them with better teachers and more productive scholars. McBride felt proud of his accomplishments in the academic area, but Simpson's record in



sports also pleased the former student athlete. He supported the athletic program and did his part to keep the teams competitive. A lasting symbol of his support came in 1987 when the new baseball facility on campus was named McBride Field in his honor. That same year became his last at Simpson, as McBride retired after more than three decades as a college professor and administrator.

He sees his long career as one of service, his wife, Luella, helping him along the way, as she joined him in working with students and faculty. Her efforts as a college "first lady" were rewarded with an honorary degree at Simpson College. Moreover, McBride himself was honored by the creation of a McBride Lecture Series at the school, an annual event that the couple always tries to attend. He says that his career and his life were "not about money." Instead, it was about the "process of working with people." He believes that the motive to help others is "something that you do naturally." He thinks that service is a matter of trust, something that "comes out of the dedication of the best capabilities you have to working with people and trusting them and having them trust you."

McBride urges today's students to "be honest and be honestly committed to the question of values in life," advising that they "don't avoid the hard questions." He emphasizes the importance of honesty, argu-

ing that one must be honest with one's self and in terms of one's relationships with others. Quick to acknowledge the importance of community and cooperation, McBride asserts that we should remember that we are "working together as a community" and that we should "do things together." Working together with others in honest, trusting relationships has been the effective foundation of his career of service in diverse contexts. Across more than three decades of work, McBride has influenced the lives of literally thousands of students on three college campuses. A mark of his success is the high regard they maintain for him.

Many successful people point to Robert McBride as the man who inspired them in some way or another. Whether he was teaching in the classroom, leading a student discussion in his home, working with fellow professors, or trying to overcome a crisis on campus, Dr. Robert McBride has embodied a model of service and leadership that has inspired others to serve with the same dedication and integrity as their mentor. Called to a vocation of service that has ranged from the philosophy classroom to the offices of academic dean and college president, this athletic pre-theology student has richly fulfilled his call.

— *Sease Award*¹ 1988

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- A (p. 88) Robert McBride—"Back to School at Indiana Central College Coop." Photograph provided from the McBride family album used with permission of Luella and Ron McBride.
- B (p. 89) Robert McBride during the time of his military service in World War II. Photograph provided from the McBride family album used with permission of Luella and Ron McBride.
- C (p. 90) Robert McBride as a football player at Indiana Central University in 1940s. Photograph provided from the McBride family album used with permission of Luella and Ron McBride.
- D (p. 90) Robert McBride with family assembled at the dining room table, interior scene at the McBride home on Castle Avenue, the site of the Philosophy Club gatherings recalled with affection by students (1955–1965). Photograph provided from the McBride family album used with permission of Luella and Ron McBride.
- E (p. 91) Robert McBride lecturing to a group of students at Indiana Central College, from *The Oracle* (1960). Photograph provided by the Frederick D. Hill Archives at the University of Indianapolis.