

Brennan, Stan (Stanislaus)

by Turlough O'Riordan

Brennan, Stan (Stanislaus) (1929–2012), Franciscan missionary, was born James (Seamus) Brennan on 1 December 1929 at Carrowkeel, Co. Roscommon, the seventh of ten children born to James Brennan and his wife Kate (née O'Dowd) who were farmers. He was initially educated at the local CBS. Inspired by the life of St Francis of Assisi, he studied for his leaving certificate (1946–8) at Franciscan College, Multyfarnham, Co. Westmeath. In September 1948 he was received into the Franciscan noviciate in Killarney, Co. Kerry, adopting the name 'Stanislaus' in religion. He studied philosophy at UCG (1949–52) while living at St Anthony's College in the city, and graduated BA before taking his final vows in September 1952. He then studied theology at St Isidore's Irish Franciscan College in Rome (1952–6). On gaining his BD (1956) he was ordained in Rome (2 April 1956) and afterwards taught for a year at Franciscan College, Gormanston, Co. Meath.

Volunteering for missionary work, Brennan went to South Africa in spring 1957 as spiritual director of a minor diocesan seminary in Boksburg (owing to a lack of priestly vocations it closed in 1968). Visiting his sister, a nun teaching in Nigeria, in the early 1960s inspired him to open a school; both were inspired by their father's earlier efforts in delivering adult education in Carrowkeel. In 1965 Brennan was assigned as parish priest to Rieger Park, a newly-created 'coloured' township in Boksburg, housing poverty-stricken migrant mineworkers. He established the St Francis of Assisi church there in a derelict building.

In 1966 Brennan opened a library in the township (the local public library being closed to non-whites) and organised night classes in literacy for miners, taught by volunteer parishioners. The St Anthony Education Centre provided education to black and coloured people at a time when the South African government's apartheid policy deliberately delivered inferior education in townships. Brennan established and edited the *Beam*, a substantial parish annual seeking to foster a sense of community amongst recently settled migrants. In his first editorial he noted that 'if people are to take a significant place in the destiny of their community, education is a vital means of opening a new way' (*Beam*, vol. 1).

Demonstrating an aptitude for fundraising, he established a day care centre for the elderly (1967), a sports club (1969), a new and more substantial library (housing 20,000 volumes), a school (1970), and a community hall (1972). Adult education was gradually expanded throughout the 1970s in cooperation with local Sisters of Mercy and Dominican nuns, including a language laboratory and facilities for technical and vocational instruction (funded by local businesses). During the Soweto student uprising of 1976 protesting the imposition of the Afrikaans language for instruction, St Anthony's was one of the very few local educational institutions that

remained open. Its categorisation as an adult education institute made it exempt from delivering instruction in Afrikaans.

Charging nominal fees and partially staffed by volunteers, by the early 1980s St Anthony's was the largest educational institution serving black and coloured students in South Africa. In 1995 Brennan opened the St Anthony Skills Training Centre to provide vocational training and supports to local unemployed youth. St Anthony's Education Centre grew from a dozen students in the mid-1960s to providing high school, technical and vocational education to over 5,000 students annually by the late 2000s.

In 1977 Brennan erected a new parish church and a new community hall a decade later. From 1986 he began to focus on providing social services, with a project to support over 700 deprived high school pupils, and in 1988 opened a multi-racial House of Mercy to assist those enduring drug and alcohol addiction. Appalled at the lack of treatment facilities for those suffering from HIV/AIDS, in 1991 he established medical and social support facilities to cater for them. Facing significant local opposition to the presence of an AIDS clinic, he overcame it by admitting dementia and psychiatric patients (1992), and winning a fraught legal case regarding zoning (which saw the Franciscan Order at one point being ruled liable for costs) by mobilising community, diplomatic and political allies to fight an effective public relations campaign. The St Francis Care Centre gained a reputation for providing medical care and spiritual support to HIV/AIDS sufferers, and made available effective anti-retroviral treatments to AIDS sufferers (despite some South African political leaders opposing their use and questioning their necessity). Brennan opened two clinics, operated with the Sisters of Mercy and funded by the US government, a childcare centre and a nursery school to assist those suffering from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses, and their (often orphaned) children, in the Boksburg-Vosloorus-Reiger Park area. In 2006 a shelter for battered women and abused children, Mercy Haven, was also opened.

Diplomatic yet determined, Brennan was well capable of deploying his steely reserve towards recalcitrant officials. He could also adeptly charm representatives of governments and multinational companies and raised significant local and international funding for educational, social and medical schemes. He was a highly effective manager, and his meticulous accounts and robust governance impressed funders and auditors. Many of the programmes he established conflicted with contemporary political and cultural consensus, both during and after the apartheid era. He was an early supporter of the proscribed African National Congress (ANC), allowing it to hold meetings in St Anthony's classrooms – although he himself was careful never to attend. He was also a teacher, mentor and friend of Chris Hani, former member of the executive committee of the ANC and general secretary of the South African Communist Party; after Hani's assassination in 1993, Brennan officiated at his funeral. Such links did little to endear him to the South African apartheid regime, which reportedly included his name on a deportation list. In

recognition of Brennan's contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle, Nelson Mandela attended mass at St Francis of Assisi church soon after he was inaugurated president of South Africa (10 May 1994).

Brennan returned to Ireland frequently, raising funds and visiting his family. His work was recognised internationally, and he was awarded scores of humanitarian awards (listed in *Colour blind faith*), notably the Japanese Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays in June 2012. He remained though deeply down-to-earth and liked to relax by watching the sensationalist 'Jerry Springer show' and reading the *Daily Sun*, a scurrilous tabloid. Endlessly enthusiastic, if somewhat paternalistic, he welcomed all religions and ethnicities to avail of the services St Anthony's provided, encouraging many conversions to catholicism.

In 2005 he underwent coronary bypass surgery, and moved to live in the St Francis Care Centre, where he was victim of a violent robbery that induced a bout of depression. After suffering heart problems, Brennan died on 6 July 2012 at Sunward Hospital, Boksburg. After his funeral, which took place 12 July in St Francis of Assisi parish church, he was cremated. The ANC provided a guard of honour at an all-night funeral vigil held in Rieger Park. To mark the golden jubilee of the establishment of St Anthony's Education Centre, Respond Housing Association (Ireland) sponsored the erection of the Fr Stan Brennan Workshop there in 2016, used to teach bricklaying skills. The centre's library was also renamed in Brennan's honour.

GRO (birth cert.); *The Beam*, vols. 1–3 (1968–70), *passim*; Daniel Murphy, *A history of Irish emigrant and missionary education* (2000), 481–2; *Schematismus Ordinis Fratrum Minorum* (8th ed., 2009); Marlene Lorraine Martin, 'An ethical analysis of responsibility of the church towards women infected by HIV/AIDS: with particular reference to St Francis Care Centre and Sparrow Village', M.Th. thesis, University of South Africa (2009); Stephen Muoki Joshua, 'The catholic response to HIV and AIDS in South Africa with a special reference to KWAZulu-Natal (1984–2005): a historical-critical perspective', Ph.D., University of KwaZulu-Natal (2010); *Ir. Times*, 14 July 2012; *St Anthony's Brief*, *passim*, especially Aug.–Sept. 2012, 13; Vumile Nogemane, 'Pioneer Franciscan (OFM) missionaries in South Africa, c. 1932–1960' Ph.D. thesis, Rhodes University, (2013); David Gemmell, *Colour blind faith: the life of Stan Brennan* (2013); *Southern Courier* (South Africa), 15 Apr. 2015; *Boksburg Advertiser*, 11 Nov. 2016; Peter Rule, Cani Chatty and Gezani Baloyi, 'Investigating efficacy in adult learning centres: a multi-case study', Council for quality assurance in general and further education and training (2016), 141–2; St Anthony's Education Centre, 2016 annual report (fiftieth anniversary); 'Irish priest receives award from emperor of Japan'. clericalwhispers.blogspot.com/2012/06/irish-priest-receives-award-from.html; 'St Francis Care Centre', www.stfranciscarecentre.co.za; 'St

Anthony's Education Centre' www.st-anthonyscentre.co.za; 'The Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry donates r10000.00 to St Francis Care Centre', www.za.emb-japan.go.jp/en/pressReleases/press_releases_16092008.html; '2012 spring conferment of decorations on foreign nationals', Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.mofa.go.jp/announce/info/conferment/pdfs/2012_sp.pdf; websites accessed July 2018; information from Fr Patrick Conlan, Franciscan Library, Dún Mhuire, Seafield Road, Killiney, Co. Dublin

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