

Christ Comes in The Stranger's Guise

A History of the Open Door Community



by Peter R. Gathje



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\$10 donation

Editor's Note, November 2001: Pete Gathje is now a professor of Christian Ethics and Peace Studies at the Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee. He remains a faithful friend of the Open Door Community.

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Preface

In writing this book I have not worked alone. Along the way I have received invaluable editorial advice from a number of persons from a wide variety of backgrounds: African and Euro-Americans, middle class and homeless, PhD's and GED's. As I finished each chapter it was sent around to these readers who made suggestions and corrections as needed. It was a long and sometimes frustrating process, but I found it opened new perspectives on the Open Door, its place in the church and in American society.

Some of these readers I know quite well, since they are partners in the Open Door Community: C.M. Sherman, Elizabeth Dede, Ed Loring, and Murphy Davis. They provided needed encouragement to keep going and helped keep facts about the community in order. Others I have only met briefly or know only through their editorial comments. From Ed Loring I have learned that their knowledge of the life and work of the Open Door comes from quite different, though long-term relationships, with the community. Ron Spahn is the pastor of the Church of the Messiah in Detroit, Michigan and is a long-time friend of the Open Door. Sandra Barnhill is the Director of Aid to Imprisoned Mothers. She also works for an end to the death penalty. For several years she was also one of the early-rising Butler Street Breakfast cooks. Jack Alderman has been a friend of the community for more than a decade. He lives on death row in Georgia. He is also a poet whose work frequently appears in the community's newspaper, *Hospitality*. Don Beisswenger is a theology professor at Vanderbilt University. During a sabbatical year he lived and worked at the Open Door for several months. He continues to work with the homeless in Nashville, Tennessee. Erskine Clark is a professor of American Christianity at Columbia Presbyterian Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Eunice Wagner, of Warren Wilson College, added her editorial expertise to greatly improve the final text. I thank these readers for their time, their comments, and their editorial recommendations. I have incorporated their work as best I could. The shortcomings remain my own.

Along the way I also relied upon some "unofficial" readers. My youngest brother, Mike Gathje, arrived to live in Decatur with my wife and I just in time to be cajoled into reading finished chapters. Scott Thumma, a fellow graduate student at Emory University, has read selected chapters and tried to keep some sociology in the text. Finally, without the energy and inspiration of the entire Open Door Community renewing me each week I would never have finished. My thanks for welcoming me into your life. I hope that what I have written captures some of that life so others may also share in its humor and hope.

Introduction

It was in the winter of 1987 that I first heard of the Open Door Community and its work with the homeless and imprisoned. As a student at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, I was looking for a master's thesis topic that would combine my interests in Christian ethics and political action. One of my professors, Hendrikus Boers, suggested that I look into the Open Door Community in Atlanta. John Barbour, a runner friend of mine who had been a volunteer with the community for several years, told me more about the place. The Open Door did more than serve the homeless and imprisoned in a variety of ways, he said. It also engaged in protests to dramatize the injustice suffered by people on the streets or in prisons. Through John, a meeting was set up for me with Ed Loring, a founding partner of the community.

I met with Ed and explained what I hoped to do in terms of my research. There was some skepticism on his part. Was I just another academic hoping to observe and dissect the community? Actually I was that. But I told Ed that I also wanted to begin volunteer work with the community, and that when summer came I wanted to live at the Open Door as a resident volunteer. This "participant observation" would be crucial for understanding the people and work of the place. I also recalled my own experience with community life as a Benedictine monk for almost three years. This experience and my willingness to join in the life of the Open Door, Ed later told me, were important factors in the community's decision to let me research and write about them.

About a week after this interview I went with community members to help serve the Butler Street breakfast. I was filled with trepidation. I had no previous contact with homeless people and I didn't know any of the community members. On the way to Butler Street C.M.E. Church, the Open Door's old green van stalled at almost every intersection. The driver, Dietrich Gerstner, came to the community from West Germany. His driving might have been acceptable on the "autobahn" but it was terrifying on the streets of Atlanta. Along the way I was regaled with stories of disasters that had occurred on other mornings while serving breakfast. It was, I found out later, typical of the humor community members often employ to release the sorrow and fears they face in their work. That morning it simply made me more anxious.

In speaking with other volunteers over the next several months I found that my fears that morning were not so unusual. The homeless initially seem so different from those who, like me, come from middle class backgrounds to volunteer at shelters or soup kitchens. What I – and others – have quickly realized, however, is that these fears are unfounded. Homeless persons are human beings who are surviving as best they can under extremely inhuman circumstances. At Butler Street I found men, women, and on some mornings, children, who were incredibly friendly and forgiving in the face of horrendous conditions. Over the next months, I also occasionally encountered some very angry persons, mad at being cold and hungry and rejected. Their anger appeared to me quite rational, given their situation.

While serving grits I had the chance to talk with community members, with volunteers from the church, and with folks from the streets. It was a world quite different from the

small town in Minnesota where I had grown up. The blend of poverty, joblessness, and race was unfamiliar. How could there be lines of people every morning for breakfast in a country as rich as the United States? How could the city of Atlanta afford to set aside millions of dollars in federal aid for the development of Underground Atlanta when people remained homeless in city streets?

When summer came I moved in with the community. My room was in the basement of the large old building the Open Door calls home. It was sparsely furnished with a mattress on the floor, a chair, and a desk. I had returned to monastic life. Only this monastery was in the city. The noise from the street seemingly never stopped. And the people there were tightly bound up with the problems and pressures of the homeless and imprisoned.

The prison ministry at first seemed quite remote from the daily life of the community. But then it took on a terrible concreteness. Four executions were conducted by the state of Georgia while I lived at the Open Door. The men killed were close to the community, especially to Murphy Davis, who is central to the community's prison ministry. The Open Door led vigils of protest at the state capitol building before each execution. One of the men executed requested that the Open Door conduct his funeral.

It struck me that the actions of the community reflected the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick, ransoming the captive, and burying the dead. Later it became clear to me why the community engages in these works. I learned that from its beginning the community has seen its mission in light of Matthew 25 from which this list of works is largely drawn. These works, theologians have noted, testify to our solidarity in sin and our common need for redemption and healing. The central belief of the Open Door, based on Matthew 25, is that Christ comes under the stranger's guise, and specifically Christ is known among the homeless poor and the imprisoned.

But I also learned that this community believes mercy without justice is a hollow manner in which to serve the poor who come as Christ. Mercy, charity, or love is the basis of justice and its fulfillment. In serving soup or visiting prisoners, the Open Door anticipates a time when there will be plenty for all and no one will be cast out from community. These works of mercy are seen as sacraments, symbols of the justice that is sought. For this reason, the Open Door always connects its works of charity with calls for a more just society, for the creation of the beloved community of which Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke.

This call for justice takes many forms. While I lived at the Open Door I went with community members once a week to Woodruff Park in downtown Atlanta. There we handed out leaflets concerning the destruction of Plaza Park and its effect on the homeless. The park had long been a place of refuge for homeless persons and it was being destroyed in the construction of Underground Atlanta. The community was urging the city to develop a green space to replace Plaza Park, a place where the homeless could find some respite and would not be hassled by the police. The community was also pressing the city to meet the needs of the homeless for public restrooms and other

facilities instead of confronting homeless persons with punitive measures such as a proposed “vagrant free zone” in the downtown area.

Banging on soup pots, singing spirituals and protest songs, the community marched from the park to city hall. More leaflets were handed out and a mini-rally was held on the steps. The actions always generated a lot of attention. It seemed to provide a constant reminder to downtown shoppers and business people that business as usual in the city was leaving people on the streets. Often it was a reminder that irritated the lunchtime crowd in the park.

Over the course of my six weeks with the Open Door I engaged in interviews, both formal and informal, to get a sense of who the people were who formed the community. I worked with them in the soup kitchen, the shower line, and in various other tasks. I met and talked with Carolyn and Rob Johnson who had helped start the Open Door, but had recently left. The resident volunteers and members of the community from the streets and prisons were a diverse group: old, middle-aged, and young; white and black; those with college degrees and those struggling to pass the G.E.D. The variety of experiences could sometimes cause tensions, but it also provided the background for incredibly rich conversations. The different perspectives offered on events in the city, the nation, or the world, left me with a sense of my own partiality. I became convinced of the need for a plurality of views to gain a clearer vision of truth.

It was to some degree the same conviction which led community members almost from the start to spend periods of time on the streets with homeless persons. Although recognizing that these twenty-four hours on the streets are artificial, the Open Door sees them as giving an inkling of the hardships homeless people face. This time on the streets also helps to break down the barriers that naturally arise among community members serving in the soup kitchen, the shower line, or in some other work, and the homeless who are served. By sharing a “cathole,” a homeless person provides hospitality just as those from the Open Door had provided hospitality serving soup. During Holy Week community members spend extended periods of time on the streets, and they do the same in the fall when they hold their “Festival of Shelters.” Exhaustion, hunger, and cold marked my time on the streets. I saw an Atlanta that is not advertised by Central Atlanta Progress or touted by Olympic organizers.

While at the Open Door, I also experienced the intensity of the community’s worship that renews their life together and marks different times and tasks during the day. The prayer of the community provides the foundation for their work. In turn their work shapes the concerns they raise in prayer. Community members draw connections between the Eucharist and the soup kitchen, between the ritualized washing of feet and the shower line. There is in the Open Door Community a holistic connecting of prayer and work, just as there is an integrity of works of mercy and justice. The community constantly affirms that faith and daily life are a continuum.

This does not mean that community members are a pietistic bunch. In my experience, both living with the community and since, the Open Door often overflows with a vitality and a humor that is unexpected in a place that embraces those who hurt and suffer. The

colors and fashion of the community are evident on “Tie Day” when everyone dons the gaudiest, widest, and most polyester of the ties that come in with donated clothes. Birthdays provide not only a rare treat of cake and ice cream, but also opportunity for stories that “roast” the birthday person. Halloween occasions visits to the clothes closet where one can weave a nightmare out of donated finery. And one never quite gets over the ironic and joyful conviction in Ed Loring’s occasional eschatological shout, “It won’t be long now!”

In the Open Door Community I see connections with biblical stories of conversion in which persons come to understand God in a new way, and this changes their lives. These are ordinary people who have been called by God to leave behind their human securities and entrust their lives to this God who is found among the poor.

In the scriptures conversion means liberation. The Israelites leave the fleshpots and slavery of Egypt. God leads them into the desert with Moses. Liberation means leaving the job security of the fishing nets and following the itinerant preacher named Jesus. It means leaving behind the slavery of death and embarking upon a new life. In the Gospel Jesus proclaims the reality of love, and the enduring power of life over death. He invites ordinary women and men to join him in a passionate life, to have the courage to live in truth, and to reject the falsehoods which prey on human fear.

The story of the Open Door Community begins with the conversion of four persons: Murphy Davis, Ed Loring, Carolyn and Rob Johnson. Their experiences during the 1960’s with the Civil Rights and the Anti-War Movements made them critical of American society. They saw the destructive tendencies of this society continuing in the inhuman conditions imposed upon the homeless and the imprisoned. They sought an alternative to a society structured by self-interest, individualism and consumerism. Drawing upon a continuing tradition in Christian faith, they realized that a community shaped by the Gospel and its call to peace and justice could provide a powerful context for resistance.

The Open Door Community thus shares in the tradition of Christian communities founded upon Christ’s proclamation of the alternative order of the Kingdom of God. Such communities, by the character of their lives together, stand against and challenge the ethos of their day. The early monastic movements resisted the domestication of the Christian faith in the Constantinian era. Later, Benedictine monasticism preserved the peace and hospitality of Christ amidst the bloody chaos of the disintegration of Roman society. St. Francis and his followers called the church of the middle ages to identify with the poor rather than with the rich and powerful. Radical reformers such as Menno Simons summoned Christians in the 16th century to reject violence and to live simply in faith. In a similar manner, the Quakers advocated an unadorned faith, and rejected slavery as incompatible with the Christian faith.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, numerous alternative religious communities emerged in the United States that also shared in this tradition. The spirit of all these past communities still lives in modern forms in the Catholic Worker Movement, Koinonia, Sojourners Community, and the Community for Creative Nonviolence, among others. At the Open

Door many elements of that tradition were also being continued: charismatic leadership; tensions between ideals and social realities; and the belief that a small community can witness to the need for profound social change. Aware of this tradition and drawing upon its resources, the Open Door Community recognizes the power of the Gospel to form people of peace, truth and justice. In community, people can stand together in opposition to the values and social structures which wield death and claim absolute rule over human life.

Members of the Open Door Community openly admit that they struggle to live this converted life. This conversion requires that they recognize and reject the powerful idols set up in American society to take the place of God: idols of national security, of conspicuous consumption, of putting profits before people, of race and class. Conversion means they can no longer rely on those idols for their sense of identity and security. It means relying on the God who stands with the poor in love and demands justice. As the Open Door Community hears the Word of God, conversion means turning away from what is generally conceived of as success and turning toward life with the hungry, the homeless, and the imprisoned. The community remains a precarious experiment in love, for it stands against the “powers and principalities” in American society that seek the destruction of human dignity and thus deny God’s intent for human life.

The Open Door Community seeks to live this conversion in Atlanta, Georgia. In the past thirty years Atlanta has rapidly grown to become one of the largest urban centers in the South. It presents stunning contrasts of wealth and poverty, booming development and wealth set against a quarter of the population falling below the poverty level. It prides itself as the birthplace of Martin Luther King, Jr. and as a place where African-Americans hold political power, yet the city’s economic power is still largely held by white businessmen.

In this city, what does it mean to become a community of resistance? What work needs to be done? The Open Door lives in solidarity with those they serve. In the midst of the poor the community takes up the Bible, reads, reflects, and prays. They seek to analyze how class, race, and gender are used to create institutions that deny human dignity. They see that homelessness and prisons and electric chairs reflect these social factors. The community ministers to those injured because of class, race, or gender. It stands in opposition to the evil structures built upon these differences. The Open Door continues the tradition of Christian resistance with its insistence on the radicality of the Gospel which undercuts oppression based on difference.

A wide variety of people have come to the Open Door and contributed to its work and its vision of the Kingdom of God. Some have personal histories similar to the founders of the community. They come to the Open Door uneasy with the “American dream.” The dream has not personally failed them, but they see that it demands complicity with oppression and so it is contrary to faith in Christ. With this realization – this conversion – their previous lives as ministers, carpenters, teachers, nurses, students, or accountants are overturned. Seeking a new way of life based on the Gospel they come to the Open Door.

From the start of the community, there have also been people from the streets and prisons who find at the Open Door a place to renew their lives. For example, Robert Barrett stayed at the night shelter at Clifton and moved with the community to 910 Ponce de Leon. The path of those like Robert is very different from those who joined the Open Door from the middle class. Persons from the streets and prisons come to the Open Door not by choice, but by need. Homeless and living in the streets, or just out of prison, they are invited into the community. Of the many who have responded, some have stayed and become partners in the community. Resurrected from the death of the streets and the prisons, they now share their new lives by aiding their brothers and sisters. Much of the variety and depth of the Open Door Community's life comes from the sharing of life by these members of the community from the streets and prisons with those members drawn from the middle class.

One could tell the story of the Open Door Community in a number of different ways. In writing about the Open Door, I have relied on my own experience with the community over the past three years, on interviews, and on articles written by community members. I have tried to give a sense of the people and the places which make up the community. The people of the Open Door are the focus of this history. I have sought to weave together the number of smaller stories which have shaped the community over the past ten years. Community members will tell how they came to the Open Door. These members and many of the people the community touches with its hospitality will tell what the Open Door means in their lives. We will hear the community speak of its work, its prayer, its protest, and its life together. In these stories, I have sought to understand what this community values and how their values are sustained by their vision of life and in their actions. I also have considered the place of the Open Door Community within American society. Two questions have especially been central. How does the Open Door offer a morally coherent alternative to the dominant values in American society? How does the community understand itself in relation to the Gospel as it is lived in the United States today? A third question has also tagged along, and perhaps it grounds the concerns of the previous two: what does the Open Door say to us about being Christian today?

Chapter One: Common Steps Toward Clifton

The Open Door Community emerged from two couples who met at Clifton Presbyterian Church. In 1977 Ed Loring and Murphy Davis met Rob and Carolyn Johnson. Ed was the church's pastor. Murphy, also a Presbyterian minister, headed the Southern Prison Ministry and worked out of a small office at Clifton. When Carolyn and Rob joined Clifton, they became increasingly involved in the life of the congregation and its ministry. As these four talked and shared in the life of this small church, they found that they had been similarly influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, the movement against the Vietnam War, and criticisms of American society which supported those movements. Their meeting at Clifton had followed quite similar experiences of personal struggle and frustration with both American society and mainline Christian churches.

All four had been children of the middle class and entered adulthood in the 1960's. They had grown up in traditional homes. The father was the breadwinner and the mother cared for the home. Although each one had a comfortable childhood, they all experienced the demand for a mobile work force in a modern capitalist economy. Their families moved several times because of changing employment.

Still for Ed, Murphy, and Carolyn, all of this movement took place in the South. And after moving to the South in 1967 to go to college, Rob also stayed in this region. Coming of age as Southern whites, they saw how the legacy of slavery, years of discrimination, and the isolation of segregation combined to impoverish blacks and create white fear and guilt. They listened as Martin Luther King, Jr. powerfully evoked the biblical message of liberation, redemption, and reconciliation, while also holding up American constitutional ideals in the call for civil rights.

In varying degrees, all four responded to the message of the Civil Rights Movement. After they graduated from college, Rob and Carolyn Johnson worked for three years in a Methodist social program which addressed racial problems in a transitional neighborhood in Greenville, South Carolina. As a college student in the early 1960's, Ed Loring was involved in black-white student dialogues held on campus. During a summer spent studying at the University of Colorado, Murphy Davis met with minority group prisoners and heard first hand of racial biases in sentencing and treatment. These experiences of living in the South and their own efforts to respond to the message of King and others led them to see that resistance to racial equality ran deep. They saw that civil rights laws had caused a number of important changes but American society remained racist. A change of heart was still needed.

In their own churches, they saw that despite the legal gains made by the Civil Rights Movement, Sunday remained the most segregated day of the week. They knew Martin Luther King, Jr.'s prophetic denunciation of this hypocrisy in the Christian churches. His message and this reality led them to realize that far too often churches preached a Gospel that was applicable only in selective circumstances and social settings. The Gospel apparently was not the central moral reality it was said to be. Race seemed to outweigh the Gospel's equality in Christ.

The other great movement of the 1960's, the effort to end the Vietnam War, also significantly shaped the four founders of the Open Door Community. For almost the entire time they were in college or graduate school, campuses were centers of resistance to the war and radical political thought.

For vast numbers of American students and the four eventual founders of the Open Door, the war was a morally questionable undertaking conducted by a government which could not be trusted. The massive firepower used, the defoliation of large areas of forest and cropland, the creation of a huge refugee population, and the rising death toll on both sides indicated to these students that American power and technology had run amok. The deceptions practiced on the highest levels of government further alienated students from their country. They saw themselves as having made the mistake of believing in America. Whereas previously they had assumed along with most Americans that loyalty to the government meant loyalty to the nation, they now began to think that loyalty to the nation required disloyalty to the government.

During most of this time Ed Loring was in graduate school. As a teaching assistant, he remained close to the issues of the student movement against the war. Murphy Davis participated in and helped coordinate demonstrations while she attended Mary Baldwin College. The school's proximity to several other colleges and to Washington, D.C. (just over an hour away) made this a particularly lively campus for anti-war activities. Rob and Carolyn Johnson (who met at college and married after they graduated in 1971) encountered many faculty who openly criticized the war effort and the government. Rob recalled intense discussions concerning the morality of the war and the possibilities of continuing resistance against the "establishment" after college. His own moral repugnance toward the war led him to apply for conscientious objector status on religious grounds. Granted his exemption, he did two years of alternative service.

During their time in school, the four founders of the Open Door became familiar with a new left analysis of American society. This countercultural ideology analyzed the war as part of a larger moral fault in American life. American involvement in Vietnam was indicative of an American society increasingly dominated by an ethic of efficiency and profits. Human problems were ideally addressed by technological fixes. Values such as the intrinsic worth and dignity of each person were discounted as useless sentimentality. In the new left analysis, massive bombings and the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons, the problems of air and water pollution, and inner city poverty were seen as related symptoms of a technological and economic system intent on profit instead of human good. The worship of technology prevented ethical considerations of its impact on human lives. Bureaucratic political and corporate structures kept responsibility for this suffering dispersed and unacknowledged.

The new left called for a revival of "participatory democracy" in which a sense of moral community and of the cooperative side of human nature could be recovered. Echoing the utopian community efforts of 18th and 19th century America, the new left believed it was necessary to create communities in which the seductions of the larger society could be resisted. The social ideals of the new left should be put into practice by such communities

working with and organizing the poor. These communities would develop capabilities for tackling local issues that would expose the larger structural faults in American society.

Gradually, Rob, Carolyn, Ed, and Murphy began to learn that some Christians were combining this “new left” analysis with faith convictions. Such Christians were drawing upon the history of alternative Christian communities, rather than the utopian communities of the 1800’s, for models of communal life. Further they were dropping much of the new left optimism about human nature and social progress.

After leaving college, Rob and Carolyn Johnson worked in a Methodist social program in Greenville. In their training they encountered church people committed to this new left critique. These people believed the new left critique and vision provided a helpful social analysis compatible with the Christian vision of the Kingdom. Murphy Davis and Ed Loring were attracted in their studies to the work of new left historians. They began to make connections on the academic level between new left ideas and Anabaptist traditions in Protestantism. By the early 1970’s, all four of them were reading the *Post-American*, a paper published by leftist evangelicals initially united by their faith-based resistance to the Vietnam War. This community later became the Sojourners Community located in Washington, D.C., where it engaged in social protest and ministry with the poor. The paper became a magazine sharing the same name as the community. Such communities and their publications became gathering places for ideas on how Christian faith could provide a more enduring ground for social critique and activism than the ideology of the anti-war movement and the new left.

Still the critique of the new left was not easily separated from its confidence in human capabilities and the perfectibility of human community. This optimism needed to be balanced by a more sober understanding of human nature, one that recognized human weaknesses and failure. And with this sobriety there was need for a deeper sustaining spirit that would not be discouraged in the face of difficulty. The four eventual founders of the Open Door struggled with these issues as they sought to bring together their faith convictions and the social analysis offered by the new left. They were seeking some coherent vision of community life that could ground their social commitments and activism.

In this search, both couples had attempted to form communities before they met at Clifton. Both experiments ended rather quickly. The mutuality and cooperativeness in feeling promised by new left ideology folded under the real pressures of community life. Although there were some Christian motivations behind the forming of both communities, the goal of common life in each was mutuality of feeling. Service in the context of responding to the call of the Gospel had not been central. These experiences made each couple skeptical of forming a community without giving it some purpose beyond its own existence.

Given their religious backgrounds, they could turn to mainline Protestantism for help in developing this social activism grounded in a faith community. But for them this source was as troublesome as it was helpful. Ed Loring was raised a Southern Baptist. In his youth, however, he heard Carlyle Marney, his pastor, preach a “social gospel” that was

not common within this conservative denomination. The social gospel movement in American Protestantism had first emerged in response to social problems caused by industrialization in the United States. Walter Rauschenbusch, one of its leading theological proponents, summed up its spirit as a combining of the Gospel with efforts for social justice for workers. Martin Luther King, Jr. was profoundly affected by the ideals of this movement.

Influenced by Neely McCarter, a professor of his at Columbia, Ed began to see more potential for this approach in the Presbyterian Church than in his own Southern Baptist tradition. In 1964, at age twenty-four he became a Presbyterian. In 1971, Ed completed his Ph.D. coursework at Vanderbilt and returned to Columbia to teach church history. In that same year he was ordained a Presbyterian minister. Carolyn Johnson, Rob Johnson, and Murphy Davis were all raised in the Presbyterian Church. The fathers of both Rob and Murphy were Presbyterian ministers.

All four persons were active in church life before they arrived at Clifton. Carolyn and Rob, after leaving their work in the Methodist social program at Greenville, were active in the Wesley Center while they were graduate students at the University of Georgia from 1974 to 1977. When they moved to Atlanta, Rob was employed for two years by the Methodist church's "Meals on Wheels" program. Additionally, Rob and Carolyn participated in a "house church" in Marietta as part of their ongoing search for a church which combined a closely-knit community with social concern. Murphy's interest in the church and ministry had been strengthened during a year she spent in Brazil between high school and college (1966-1967). There she experienced both an awakened consciousness of the poor, and the warm, expressive, fervent Brazilian Presbyterianism so unlike the arid liberal Protestantism of her youth. Her social consciousness was further nourished during her college days of anti-war protest, and through her contact with prisoners while studying in Denver. After receiving her master of divinity degree from Columbia in 1976, she was ordained a Presbyterian minister.

But the long ties of these four people to mainline Protestantism were weakened by their own sense that it rested too easily with American culture and that its denominations reflected social divisions along racial and class lines. In their own experience, mainline churches could muster only timid criticisms of the dominant values in American culture. Churches rarely, if ever, questioned how the poor were neglected in a society that defined success through the over-consumption of goods, or how the American economic and political systems militated against the vulnerable. They sensed the church had become privatized and its message trimmed. Congregations were like private clubs, places of refuge where people of a certain race and class met to escape the unpleasantness of the world. They grew restive with a church too comfortable with the role American society had given it: protector of private morality and place of gathering for people of the same income, lifestyle, and race.

During their three years in Greenville, Rob and Carolyn were increasingly frustrated by the attitude of people within the local church. Rob relates that he and Carolyn kept "finding ourselves the token do-gooders paid by the church to do this social work." The people of the church did not want to be personally involved with the poor. They were

satisfied to give money so that others could “manage” those problems. This approach kept them distant from the poor. The best thing to do with the poor was to leave them in the hands of experts, such as Rob and Carolyn were perceived to be, and mind one’s own business. The poor were objects of charity rather than persons who in justice should be enabled to fully participate in the life of the community. This attitude stood in direct opposition to Rob and Carolyn’s convictions formed by the new left critique and their Christian faith. They saw personal involvement with the poor and systemic change as inseparable components of Christian life and social action. The Christian faith led to charity for those in need, but it also demanded work to end the injustice which caused need. To separate charity and justice, the private and the public, seemed Biblically and morally incoherent.

Their experience at Greenville began a process of alienation from the institutional church. They saw that most of their social activist friends were not churchgoers. Among these friends were people active in the women’s movement who were helping organize NOW chapters. Before visiting Clifton Presbyterian Church in late 1977, Carolyn and Rob had almost despaired of finding a church which brought together Christian worship with a liberal to leftist social vision and a commitment to feminism.

While Rob and Carolyn were struggling to make sense of their faith and their experiences of social activism, Ed and Murphy were also attempting to gain some consistency in their beliefs and social convictions. Initially this struggle was focused on Ed’s teaching at Columbia Seminary. There he began to personally experience the cultural captivity of American churches expressed in the tendency to reduce Christian ethics to an individualistic moralism. This reduction left the public spheres of politics and economics to function autonomously following their own laws of cost and efficiency. Meanwhile, the private spheres of family and church would safeguard a private morality of love. As a professor of church history at Columbia, Ed came into conflict with this moralism and its refusal to confront the values of the public sphere.

He had taught there for four years when his first marriage ended in divorce. In the spring of 1975 Ed planned to marry for a second time. Many of the faculty at Columbia were already antagonistic towards Ed because of his fiery personality and leftist political convictions. He intended in his teaching “to lead people to make choices about life; to influence people to make choices about the left.” He summed up his approach as “anti-capitalist, anti-North American, with some commitment to a liberal Jesus.” The more conservative and staid members of the faculty saw this as an attack on their explication of Christian life and ministry. It went directly against their more benign view of America as well as against their sense that religion should keep its distance from political issues. Ed’s decision to divorce his wife with whom he had had two children, and marry Murphy Davis, a younger former student, only further violated their sense of moral propriety. Out of this conflict came the decision by Columbia not to renew Ed’s contract.

The Atlanta Presbytery found a position for Ed in which they thought he and the controversy at Columbia could be quietly forgotten: Clifton Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. The Presbytery told Ed that all he had to do at Clifton was preach on Sunday, hold the hands of the dying members of the mostly elderly congregation, and when all the

members were gone, lock up the doors and leave. It was a place no one wanted to pastor – a dead end for anyone with eyes on a pastoral career. Ed, angry and hurt by what had happened at Columbia, saw it as a temporary position. It would allow him time to finish writing his Ph.D. dissertation, and provide some income and a place to live while Murphy went through her doctoral program at Emory. They planned on staying at Clifton for, at most, three years, and then with Ph.D.'s in hand, they hoped to leave and begin comfortable lives as new-left church historians at some denominational college, preferably in the mountains. By the middle of the 1970's, the stage was set for Ed, Murphy, Rob and Carolyn to meet at Clifton Presbyterian Church.

Chapter Two: Clifton Presbyterian Church

Shortly after arriving at Clifton Presbyterian Church, Ed and Murphy were asked by a member of the congregation to begin a Sunday evening Bible study. The focus of the study was not scholarly exegesis of particular passages. Rather, the group gathered to simply ask “What does this passage mean for us in our lives?” With the events of the 1960’s behind them, and the malaise of the 1970’s upon them, Ed, Murphy and this study group considered what the Bible might teach them about how to live.

As they read and reflected, they did so with the experience and knowledge they had gained from the movements of the 1960’s. At the same time, they knew that the end of legal segregation did not erase the marginalized condition of most African-Americans in the United States, nor did the end of the war reduce preoccupation with national security. Further, the tightened economy of the late 1970’s, marked by stagflation and high unemployment, fostered new competitive pressures for economic survival and this tended to chill social activism. Issues beyond bringing home a paycheck seemed less urgent.

In their Bible study, Ed and Murphy gradually discerned a more profound basis for the social critique they had learned in the 1960’s. The vision of life they discovered in the Bible struck them as more compelling, comprehensive and consistent than what the new left had offered. It brought them closer to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s theological and moral convictions which had been so powerful in the Civil Rights Movement. But the Bible study was not the only factor in the emergence of their moral stance. Rather, it developed as they wrestled with the meaning of the texts in the context of the people and events at Clifton. Each new struggle propelled them further toward the integrity of social critique and daily life that would lead to the founding of the Open Door Community.

Ed and Murphy’s theological training had emphasized study of the scriptures using the method of historical criticism. But in their experience, such a method seemed mostly an intellectual exercise unconnected with their concerns or that of the congregation at Clifton. Something more was needed to give biblical study power within their daily lives. Ed and Murphy realized that if the Bible was to speak to them with moral authority, they had to personally grapple with the text. What the Bible proclaimed about God and human life had to be taken seriously by allowing it to claim the way they lived. They had to enter the biblical world and live according to biblical reality. Their own world had to be put into question by God’s word in the Bible.

In theological terms, the Bible study was using a hermeneutic standing in the tradition of “biblical realism.” According to John Yoder, this interpretative method insists there are certain characteristics of the biblical vision “which refuse to be pushed into the mold of any one contemporary world view, but which stand in creative tension with the cultural functions of our age or perhaps any age.” As developed by Yoder and others, the biblical vision gained from this perspective results in a Christian ethic grounded directly in Jesus’ life and teaching. The social and political aspects of Jesus’ message are highlighted instead of downplayed as “eschatological.”

Employing this type of interpretation the Bible study at Clifton began to raise questions about the faithfulness of their congregation to biblical teachings. They began to consider in what ways Jesus' life and teachings might be incompatible with the realities of American society, and even with much of mainline Protestantism. These questions marked the first crucial stage in Ed and Murphy's conversion to the life they later sought to embody in the Open Door Community.

For Ed and Murphy this meant a rediscovery of the scriptures as a crucial resource for their lives. It was not long before this started to undermine their academic plans by making them seem self-centered and irrelevant. Ed began to find the pastoring of this small church more enlivening than he had thought possible. He found his academic theological work could no longer compare with his pastoral ministry. Murphy, too, was finding shortcomings in the academic world. She increasingly experienced the academic process as individualistic and overly focused on competition between students. This stood in sharp contrast to both what she was learning in the scriptures and to her deepening feminist perspective. With regard to the latter, in the summers of 1974 and 1975 Murphy participated in the Project for Women in Theological Education held at Grailville, Ohio. She felt these experiences were life-giving while her graduate studies were deadening:

At Grailville education was not the pure pursuit of knowledge, but included the building of the human person, and building relationships. At Emory we found it impossible to figure out how to work together. The process made everyone individualistic. You were to work alone and present your findings.

Together, Murphy and Ed were embarking on a struggle to take the Bible seriously by bringing its perspective to bear on all areas of their lives. They were discovering the holistic biblical call was at odds with a society that defined success by the size of one's salary, and the good life by the amount of consumer goods one could accumulate. The privatized version of the Christian life produced a narrow moralism that avoided social criticism. It fit neatly with a society that preferred to see religion as another consumer good to be enjoyed in private. This kind of religion was not competent to criticize economic or political life.

In contrast, Ed and Murphy heard the Bible proclaim God's sovereign authority in all areas of life. Commitment to a biblical life necessarily meant rejecting a bifurcated view in which Christian convictions about human life were valid only in personal relations. The liberation directed vision of the Bible could not be reduced to feeling good about being saved and to holding private moral convictions. Salvation meant both personal and social transformation.

As these insights took root in the lives of Murphy, Ed and the other participants in the Bible study, changes started to occur in several areas of congregational life at Clifton. Sunday worship was transformed. Since worship in the Bible involved the whole person, binding the community together through the Word and ritual action, a more emotional and tactual style of worship developed at Clifton. The community began celebrating the Lord's Supper frequently. They shared their concerns with one another in the context of worship, held hands during the Lord's Prayer, and embraced at the "kiss of peace." They

rearranged the sanctuary so that the community could sit in semi-circles around the pulpit, and the pulpit itself was placed on floor level. People were no longer rigidly separated by rows of pews, and pastoral leadership came not from above, but from within the congregation. Further, the New Testament passage from Galatians which allowed for no distinction between male and female in Christ led to active roles for women in worship and the use of inclusive language.

Worship at Clifton also sought to embody the biblical insistence on the connection between worship and the practice of social justice in the lives of the participants. A service of worship which made people feel good but did not move them to seek justice in their own way of life and in society was offensive to God. Worship was to be the basis for community action. In response to the Word and Eucharist, people were to be empowered to serve others, seek justice, and bring their faith into every sphere of life. This small congregation of about thirty people expressed these ideals and by late 1976 they were sponsoring a social program connecting worship to service. It hosted a weekly supper and evening of recreation for youth from a nearby low income housing project. Another area of social involvement was soon added as the congregation offered support for Murphy's growing ministry with prisoners.

This ministry had emerged when Murphy was confronted with an issue that compelled her attention in a way graduate studies never could. In July 1976, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Georgia death penalty law. Murphy and Ed were already involved with Georgia Christians Against the Death Penalty, a group Ed had helped to start. This was one of a number of small groups that in Georgia that now came together to protest the Supreme Court decision and to seek to change the law. In November 1976, Murphy and Ed traveled to Macon with their close friend Austin Ford for a meeting of this group. There they met and listened to the mothers of several death row prisoners, including Betty George, Marian Butler, and Viva Lamb. Murphy recalls that Viva Lamb's address was especially powerful:

Viva very simply described the pain and ostracism and that whole level of grief – the further victimization that was created by the death penalty. Somebody had been victimized by the murder, and now a whole new set of victims was created as they waited for their family member on death row to die.

Hearing these women speak rekindled Murphy's concern for prisoners which she had first felt as a student. She recognized that the Bible study and her dissatisfaction with graduate studies had been training her ears to hear a call from people who were poor and oppressed. Now the call became defined in the form of ministry with prisoners, especially prisoners on death row. After a year and a half of graduate studies at Emory University, Murphy decided that life in a study carrel was not for her. She quit graduate school and began to search for a way to follow the call she heard.

She did not have to search long. In early January 1977, Joe Ingle of the Southern Coalition on Prisons hired Murphy to organize in Atlanta a national demonstration against the death penalty. The "Witness Against Executions" was scheduled for Easter weekend of that year. Clifton supplied office space for Murphy and she went to work. A

year and a half before, the church had been written off as dead. Now it became the meeting place for nationally known foes of the death penalty, for the planning of demonstration strategy, and for the training of marshals for the march. Some 3,000 people from around the United States came to participate in the demonstration which gathered national media attention.

Following this mass protest, Murphy decided she would continue her advocacy for prisoners and her work against the death penalty. She began organizing prison visits for the relatives of prisoners who did not have the means to make the five-hour drive from Atlanta to the state prison in Reidsville. By 1978, this had become a monthly excursion which, as Murphy described it, meant mothers jammed into an old blue van, “going to visit their sons, with huge baskets filled with fried chicken and potato salad. Seems to me it was always 102 degrees when we would roll through Vidalia and turn right onto the prison reservation.” As Murphy, Ed, and a few other members of the congregation drove on these trips, they began to learn first-hand about poverty, prison sentences made longer because of one’s race, and the depth of faith and hope among those who live on society’s margins.

Among those now involved with this ministry with the Clifton congregation were Carolyn and Rob Johnson. In late 1977, at a gathering of the Atlanta Presbytery Task Force on Hunger, Ed and Rob had met. Ed invited Rob to worship at Clifton. Rob and Carolyn responded to the invitation and found the kind of church they had long sought. Carolyn recalled that Clifton immediately struck her and Rob as different from all their previous church experiences:

We felt at home the first time we were at Clifton. There was a focus on social justice issues and a very spiritual, worshipful environment. Also the language was inclusive. We’d never hoped in terms of a church to find all three of those things.

The social activism and more lively worship were making the church at Clifton a place for Christians to gather who were in sympathy with moral criticisms of American society and mainline Protestantism.

For Ed, Murphy, and now Rob and Carolyn, Clifton was providing the context for a deepening and expanding of the social critique they had formed in the 1960’s. They became more aware of how Martin Luther King Jr.’s inspiration in the Civil Rights Movement was heavily dependent on the Bible and the spirit of African-American churches. This combination of fervent communal spirituality and social action was a model they hoped to emulate at Clifton. But they soon discovered this model could be taken only so far within a traditional denominational setting.

The Bible study remained the catalyst for personal and congregational transformation at Clifton. This became somewhat problematic, however, since the whole congregation did not participate in the study itself. Those who gathered on Sunday evenings tended to be the more committed members of the church, and the more critical of mainline churches and the United States. Rob described the Bible study as consisting of “people who shared some real skepticism about the mainline church. It had basically been co-opted by the

culture and couldn't be relied upon to interpret what was going on in America." The people in the Bible study had a "shared value that society needs to change and religious people should be about that."

The discussion of each biblical passage was organized around the question: "What does this mean for how we ought to live?" This led to both personal and social considerations of the text. The interaction of text with political convictions led not only to critiques of American society and mainline religion, but also to criticism of the church at Clifton. After a while, this criticism began to take aim at the social ministry of the congregation. Both the supper and recreation night program and the prison ministry were part-time endeavors for the congregation and, like the Bible study, not everyone in the church participated. Even for those who did participate, their lives away from the church still generally followed the patterns of American society. The Bible study was finding a call in scripture for obedience to God in all areas of life. How could this call be lived with an institutional and ethical fragmentation in which life was divided into the different contexts of work, family, church, and politics? The holistic biblical vision of life was blurred by these separations. In this context, how could Christians continue to live their biblical faith that human life as created by God flourishes when it expresses cooperation, interdependence, and special concern for the vulnerable?

Facing the tensions caused by this fragmentation, the issue of the mission of the congregation at Clifton began to sharpen. Especially among those in the bible study, there was a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the direction the supper and recreation night was taking. It was requiring more crowd control of rambunctious teenagers, and offered little chance for the personal relationships the people of the church had hoped to form with the youth. The prison ministry, on the other hand, was too forbidding for most, and was a small operation not requiring a significant commitment from the congregation. Essentially the church provided space and moral support for this ministry. With these issues in the forefront, a decision was made out of the Sunday evening Bible study to do an internal study of the congregation on the question of what Clifton's mission should be.

Rob Johnson was placed in charge of the study. He had done a similar mission exploration while working with churches in Greenville, South Carolina. The study at Clifton took the form of Wednesday night meetings in which a small group gathered to discuss: "What are the problems in Atlanta, or in our neighborhood, and what are the possible responses of our church?" After a month of such meetings, a serious split in the congregation over the question of mission became evident. On the one hand were those who wanted the church to focus inward. The mission of the church was conceived as the building up of the sense of fellowship among the members of the congregation. Reflecting a more privatized view of religious life, this group saw the church primarily as a refuge from the turbulence and competitiveness of the world. Given the immensity of social problems and their intractable nature, it was best to turn inward and create a community where one felt safe and secure. On the other hand were those who wanted a church turned outward. They saw the church as essentially a base for actions to promote social justice. Christians should be social activists. This group had numerous ideas about what the church at Clifton should do, but was unable to reach a consensus on any one of them.

At this point the mission study at Clifton stalled. The very model of the church held by Ed, Murphy, Rob, Carolyn, and others in the congregation which sought to combine spirituality and social action was now under question. The study had surfaced tensions in the congregation over these values and their practice. It revealed that the congregation could not decide what type of life it hoped to foster. It appeared as if the congregation's division would prevent any fundamental alteration of its life.

Instead of forcing the issue, the leaders of the study decided they needed to discern what the split in the congregation meant for the church and for the possibilities of Christian life in American society. Could intense spirituality and an emphasis on community be joined with social activism? Or must these remain separate in a society where people choose to participate in the church as it fits their needs and schedules?

To examine and reflect upon these questions, a small group continued to meet on Wednesday nights after the mission study ended. This group consistently included the four eventual founders of the Open Door Community, Ed, Murphy, Carolyn, and Rob. They gathered to share a meal, read scripture, pray, and also to discuss articles about poverty and Christian discipleship drawn from sources such as *Sojourners*. They still hoped to somehow combine in their lives, and in the congregation, intensity of spirit with social action. *Sojourners* presented them with examples of Christian communities that seemed to have these characteristics. Such communities served the poor and went beyond the denominational model of church life. As alternative Christian communities, their lives were structured so that the biblical ethic could be practiced in all facets of life. To Rob, Carolyn, Murphy, and Ed, this type of life now appeared as the best possible resource for breaking with their experience of an ineffectual congregational model trying to address both Christian community and social ministry.

With this realization growing among the group, one question came to be central on these Wednesday evenings: "God, what will you have us do?" As the meetings continued into the fall of 1978, there was, according to Rob Johnson, "a growing clarity that something important about the Gospel was the issue of being in proximity with the poor." Jesus had habitually associated with the outcasts, the marginalized, the poor of the land. His example and words were taken as normative. The consensus grew that "God was calling us to serve the poor and to live our lives based on the Scriptures." Ed Loring put it this way: "We recognized that the call to serve God is the call to serve the poor." With this emphasis on service to the poor, the vision of life that had its inception in the Sunday night Bible study became sharper. An important second step toward the formation of the Open Door Community was now underway.

Their discussions began to center on what form this service to and solidarity with the poor should take. They were convinced that to be faithful to the story of Jesus, their service must come through personal and sustained involvement with the lives of the poor. It would not be enough to be part-time servants. They had already realized that conversion required complete change, and a life lived wholly for the Kingdom. They now noticed that "in our weekly Bible study, readings, and prayers with others at Clifton, we kept sensing an out-of-our-control drive to break a *barrier* between ourselves and the poor." This barrier they felt was being built "out of our own heads that told us to be

realistic, and our own fears and uncertainties [that] kept us from the poor.” Their middle class value of competitive individualism had erected a wall of judgment between them and the poor. To be poor meant one had failed as a human being. Further, residential segregation by wealth and race, and parallel congregational segregation, militated against dismantling that wall. How would they be able to break down that wall within their own lives, and in the life of the Clifton congregation?

The scriptures, it appeared to them, were fairly clear about how people should live in obedient response to God. Two passages, one from the Old Testament and one from the New, were emerging as especially formative in their lives. The first was Isaiah 58:6-7:

The kind of fasting I want is this: remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives.

The second passage, Matthew 25:31-46, told of the last judgment in which those who served the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the imprisoned were saved. This passage had long been influential in Christian groups that sought social and ecclesiastical reform or radical change, and now it once again shaped the moral vision of Murphy, Ed, Rob, and Carolyn. Murphy found that Matthew 25 had provided:

...the most consistent light for us... The whole vision that is given to us is that in the people among us now who are marginalized in any way, the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner – in their sufferings we come to understand the sufferings of Christ. Therefore at the heart of the Gospel is the mandate in Matthew 25. It is not only clear, it is harsh. If you do this – feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner – you’re welcome into heaven. If you don’t, you’re going to hell. It’s very stark and very clear. Do you spend your life with those who accumulate, or do you spend your life with those who are always on the outside and always suffering?

By January 1979, Murphy, Ed, Carolyn, and Rob were growing in the conviction that to be with those who were marginalized and suffering was a necessary characteristic of Christian life and community. Part-time acts of charity done out of one’s abundance and at one’s convenience were no longer sufficient. Such acts maintained an institutional and ethical fragmentation in life contrary to the holistic ethic of biblical faith. Carolyn Johnson summarized their thinking at this point:

It didn’t make sense to be studying the Gospel and worshipping without trying to live a lifestyle that was compatible, as we saw it, with the Gospel. Ministry with the poor and oppressed was very much at the heart of what we were studying. We thought it was time to get involved with actually doing something.

In part, some of these ideas were consistent with the new left values they had become familiar with in the 1960’s. Revolutionaries should go and live with the oppressed in order to form organizations to challenge the existing powers. Yet, the most important

source for their convictions had become the Bible. Within the Jewish and Christian communities, scriptural stories recounted God's activity on behalf of the enslaved, the poor, and the powerless. In these actions, God revealed the pattern for human life and called upon humans to manifest it in every sphere. Now they were considering whether this biblical pattern of life was possible without a community of faith that consistently rejected current social patterns. It was becoming more and more apparent that denominational structures that had emerged in response to such social patterns could not provide much support for this type of alternative community.

They would wait no longer for a consensus to form within the congregation at Clifton. Perhaps such agreement would never come and they were faced with the mandate of the Gospel – Now! But what could they do that would encompass their whole lives and break the barrier between their lives and the lives of the poor? The Southern Prison Ministry Murphy had begun seemed a partial answer, but it was not enough. The very nature of prison ministry made for limited visits and time with prisoners. They could not go and live in the prisons. The Gospels called them to a more continuous, daily, and personal presence with the poor.

In this presence and this service they did not want to repeat the pattern of social welfare. They did not want to be social workers who faced the poor in a professional-client relationship. Such a relationship would entail addressing the poor through a maze of impersonal bureaucratic rules. They wanted to avoid this objectification of the poor as a problem handled by bureaucratic apparatus. They wanted to bring together their lives lived in response to the Gospel with lives lived in solidarity with the poor. They wanted to affirm the dignity of the poor and their membership in the human community. But they wondered how they might do this. How could they structure this holistic biblical life?

Chapter Three: Opening the Night Shelter

There seemed to be no easy answer to the question of how they might come to center their lives on the biblical call to wholeness that emerged from their Bible study. But a number of events helped them to begin answering the question. In January 1979, Murphy and Ed went to New York for a meeting related to the prison ministry. There they found what became the first elements of an answer. While in New York they decided to visit Maryhouse, a Catholic Worker Movement house of hospitality for homeless persons. They met with the people who lived and worked at Maryhouse, and were profoundly affected by the warm and accepting hospitality offered to homeless people there. When they left they were given a copy of Dorothy Day's autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*. Ed began to read it on the train ride back to Atlanta.

At this time, Ed knew very little about Dorothy Day, the woman who along with Peter Maurin had started the Catholic Worker Movement during the Great Depression of the 1930's. But as Ed read, he found much in her life with which he could identify. She had lived a Bohemian lifestyle when young. She was an intellectual and a radical. She had painfully moved toward conversion, losing along the way many of her friends and even the man she had lived with who was the father of her child. In her conversion, she became increasingly close to the poor, eventually opening a house of hospitality where they could find shelter, food, and welcome without questions or judgment. In the soup kitchens and social activism of the Catholic Worker Movement houses of hospitality, in their common life sustained by the Gospel and shared with the poor, Ed thought Murphy, Carolyn, Rob and he could fulfill the call they had heard in their Bible study and prayer. He saw in this coming together of their searching and the work of hospitality "a movement of the Spirit." As he and Murphy shared their reading of *The Long Loneliness*, they began to see what this call of hospitality would require of them. It was an emotional trip back to Atlanta. Tears were shed, both out of joy for the possibility of work with the poor now presented them, and out of fear for what that might mean for their lives.

Upon their return, Murphy and Ed quickly shared with Rob and Carolyn the enthusiasm they had felt about the call to hospitality given them at Maryhouse and by Dorothy Day's life. Together they began to explore how they might do this work with the homeless in Atlanta.

But as they investigated homelessness in Atlanta, they found a political and business establishment that thought the numbers of homeless in the city were insignificant. Homelessness, they were told, was not worth addressing except with police action to keep the "vagrants" away from certain areas. The stereotype of the street person as a skid row bum, irresponsibly drunk on cheap wine was strong and officially supported. Business and political leaders in the city claimed that the Salvation Army and the Union Mission offered all that was needed for these dregs of society.

Yet in talking with people from the Salvation Army, the Union Mission, and with homeless people, they quickly discovered a different reality. The number of homeless persons in Atlanta was rapidly increasing, and among them were more and more African-Americans. None fit the demeaning stereotype of worthless bum that was offered by

business and political leaders. Among the homeless were workers broken by years of hard manual labor; people forced into the streets by the destruction of low income housing as Atlanta developed; former textile mill workers and farmers who had come to the city looking for work, found none, and rapidly depleted their savings; Vietnam veterans who had not made the adjustment back to civilian life; mentally ill people who had been de-institutionalized; persons struggling with substance abuse; and hundreds of others, each with their own story of how they ended up on the streets. They learned that in 1979 an estimated two thousand people were homeless in Atlanta. The Salvation Army had fourteen beds for these people, and offered one free night every six months. The Union Mission had more beds, but allowed only three free nights per lifetime. These two institutions provided the only shelter available for the homeless in the city of Atlanta.

Murphy, Ed, Carolyn, and Rob became convinced that the most immediate need among homeless people was shelter. They considered how they might meet that need at Clifton. Starting a shelter, they decided, would be the way they could respond to the call discerned in their Bible study and prayer. This shelter would involve them personally with the homeless. The church could be opened as a sanctuary for homeless persons to share a meal, stay the night, shower, and get a change of clothes. Yet as they reflected further on this plan, they began to waver.

Opening a shelter at Clifton “just wasn’t practical” at this time. Murphy and Carolyn were pregnant (Carolyn would give birth to Christina on May 3rd, two months premature); Rob was in need of back surgery; and the space at Clifton seemed too small for a shelter. It could hold, at most, twenty or thirty people for a night. It was time, they thought, to be realistic in responding to this biblical call to serve the poor. Considering all the facts, and seeing the strain it would put on them and the church, they concluded it would be best to “study the issue of homelessness and a shelter at Clifton for another year.” “We rationalized,” said Ed.

In August 1979, as part of their ongoing study, they invited Mitch Snyder from the Community for Creative Nonviolence (CCNV) in Washington, D.C. to come and speak to the congregation at Clifton about homelessness. Snyder had become a moral authority in the lives of many Christians who, like Ed, Murphy, Rob, and Carolyn, sought to combine Christian faith with a radical analysis of American society and a life with the poor. His reputation had spread widely since he and others in CCNV had occupied the National Visitors Center and used the empty building as a shelter for the homeless. The Department of the Interior agreed after negotiations to temporarily allow this use as an “experiment.” When it decided that the shelter had become an embarrassment to the city it was forcibly closed down. Snyder and others from his community were arrested. The CCNV, in addition to its soup kitchen and shelter, engaged in a number of public demonstrations in which they actively confronted city and church officials with the injustice of homelessness. Community life in CCNV was described by its members as “a blending of the elements of spirituality, direct service, resistance, constructive action, and the personal integration of justice.”

Ed and Murphy picked Snyder up at the airport on Saturday night. He would speak at worship the following morning. Ed expected Snyder “to give us some little moral homily

on how the poor need us, and next year we would have a shelter if we really tried hard.” Instead, Snyder stood in the pulpit Sunday morning and told the congregation that there were people suffering and dying from homelessness in the city of Atlanta. If they were really Christians, Snyder said, they must respond to that injustice and that death. “You have this room at Clifton, you have a bathroom, you have a washer and dryer. It would be immoral,” he thundered, “if you did not open the doors this fall to the homeless poor of this city. There are thousands out there that need you, and this space belongs to them in justice.” The directness of Snyder’s talk unsettled those who heard it. The tone was not soothing and the content made folks quite uncomfortable.

Snyder’s radical message had gone beyond the liberal assumptions prevalent at Clifton and still present in the thinking of Ed, Murphy, Rob, and Carolyn. In their liberal Christianity, activism was limited to working through the appropriate channels and with appropriate decorum. Over time, this kind of political pressure would be applied gradually to gain a more nearly just society. Occasional acts of charity would suffice to fill the gaps left by engaging in a reforming political process. Now Snyder was presenting a more threatening political task: the challenging of the very system itself and its moral legitimacy.

He was directly questioning whether Christian life could be compatible with a political and economic system built on the assumption that justice was best achieved by the free pursuit of self-interest. Homelessness, Snyder claimed, was a symptom of a deeper systemic ill: the moral contradiction that a society based on isolation, competition, and self-interest could lead to a community in which human dignity was affirmed. If Christians accepted this system, they became just one more self-interested voice in the argument over the distribution of goods by the state. Snyder argued that the congregation at Clifton should become a community which consistently and publicly embodied the biblical life they privately confessed. They needed to do more than participate in the conventional politics of interest. They must enact in their own lives the justice they claimed to seek. In the Bible, they encountered a Jesus whose life was given over to “the least of these.” Now they were asked to be a community which witnessed to that truth in their daily lives.

Carolyn had been at home that Sunday caring for Christina, but Rob, Ed, and Murphy heard in Snyder’s message a judgment on their rationalizing about opening a shelter. The next morning during breakfast, the four of them made the decision to begin a shelter that fall at Clifton. “We believed, God was speaking through Mitch to our personal lives,” Ed said, “and we hoped, to the life of the church. We would move ahead, and we would open the shelter. We would pay whatever price it took, physical or otherwise, to get it open by November 1.”

With the city administration of Atlanta publicly scoffing at the idea that there was a large homeless population, the task of opening a shelter faced large financial and psychological barriers. Downtown Atlanta was in the initial stages of a revitalization. New offices, hotels, and places to shop were being developed. Central Atlanta Progress, the major downtown business organization, had a special “Derelict Committee” to oversee

problems with transients. Their main goal was to make sure that the homeless found no welcome there. There were, for example, no public bathrooms in the downtown area.

Quite aware of these facts, Murphy, Ed, Carolyn, and Rob went forward with their plans and spent the next two months making the necessary arrangements for the shelter at Clifton. Materials such as cooking utensils and a washer and dryer had to be purchased. An agreement had to be worked out with the church, since some members of the congregation wanted it clear that the shelter was not the church's responsibility.

Carolyn and Rob moved into an apartment in Ed and Murphy's house at this time. The move was for practical reasons only, not with the idea that they would form a community. It just seemed to make good sense with Rob and Carolyn spending so much time at the church preparing for the opening of the shelter. The previous experiences both couples had with community kept them hesitant to try again.

On November 1, 1979, the night shelter opened. Plastic sheeting protectively covered the carpet of the church, and foam rubber mats donated by the Community for Creative Nonviolence provided beds for the homeless guests. Murphy humorously remembers the beginnings as inauspicious:

At the time Hannah (Murphy and Ed's daughter) was ten days old, Christina (Carolyn and Rob's daughter) was barely five months old, and Rob was flat on his back from back surgery. There was nothing wrong with Ed that we could see, so we decided to open up anyway.

Given these circumstances, it was probably a blessing that initially the shelter was practically empty. On the first night, three people stayed there, and by the third night, there was only one. Street people were suspicious of Ed's efforts to get them to ride with him to Clifton. The shelter had opened during a time when a number of African-American children in Atlanta had disappeared and were later found murdered. People were fearful, and street people, as always, knew the best way to survive on the streets was to remain as invisible as possible.

Despite the initially low numbers, they kept the shelter open. They realized it would take some time to build up the trust necessary for people to come to the shelter. Murphy explained how their efforts began to reach people on the streets and the numbers increased:

For the first several weeks, Ed and others just drove around in this old blue van we had, stopping and asking people if they wanted to come and spend the night in our church. You can imagine that most people thought we were crazy. But after that, word sort of got around that there was good food and a place to spend the night over at Clifton, and people started coming in. Soon, our problem was not to get people into the shelter, but to figure out how we were going to limit the number of people we let in. The church was so small, there just wasn't room to hold them all, and that was a very difficult thing for us.

With more people seeking shelter than there were spaces available, a pick up point was established near Grady Hospital in downtown Atlanta. Tickets were handed out for the limited number of beds available. It was often a chaotic, turbulent scene as people jostled for the available spaces. The attempt was made to choose the oldest, weakest, and sickest people in the crowd. It was a difficult task as up to a hundred people milled about, hoping for a place to spend the night.

The shelter at Clifton Presbyterian Church was the first free place of hospitality to open in an Atlanta church. Rob, Carolyn, Ed, and Murphy were joined in the shelter work by a few others from the congregation. After about three months of operation, a change took place among the guests at the shelter. Without being asked, they began to help the volunteers do the dishes, wipe off tables, and mop the floor. Stereotypes about the homeless were being broken down as volunteers from Clifton found that many of the shelter guests went to work every day at area labor pools. The volunteers also found themselves questioning their own values which judged people by how they looked or how much money they made.

Rob, Carolyn, Murphy, and Ed soon realized that the shelter at Clifton was not enough. The need for shelter was vastly outstripped by the numbers of homeless persons now seeking it at Clifton and at the more traditional Union Mission and Salvation Army shelters. They began to push for other churches to begin offering shelter. Their message was that the offering of hospitality went to the center of the Christian faith and ethic. The Gospel they were committed to required direct face-to-face servanthood and community with the poor. It was not sufficient for Christians to give charity so that surrogates could work with the poor. Such surrogate charity maintained the barriers of wealth, class, and status between the giver of charity and the recipient. If churches acted this way, they were no different than welfare programs administered by the state in which the poor were judged and managed by bureaucratic rules. Charity was given out of the excess of one's possessions and welfare was financed through the compulsion of taxes. The shelter at Clifton was committed to break these barriers of wealth and bureaucracy. The homeless were not charity cases – they were people to whom shelter and food were due in justice.

Their advocacy for other churches to open shelters began to bear fruit when on January 14, 1981, Central Presbyterian Church, located across from Georgia's Capitol building in downtown Atlanta, opened a night shelter. Other churches rapidly followed. From its modest beginning at Clifton Presbyterian, the church shelter movement in Atlanta was spreading. As the winter of 1981-1982 approached, All Saints Episcopal, Oakhurst Baptist, and Trinity United Methodist opened shelters. By the fall of 1982, some sixteen churches opened their doors to shelter homeless people. The city government of Atlanta, however, had still not responded.

Within the lives of Murphy, Ed, Rob, and Carolyn, the pressures of running the shelter at Clifton heightened their own continuing questions about whether a congregational setting could adequately support an intense spirituality combined with social action with the poor. Did their hospitality work at the Clifton night shelter really break the barriers between them and the homeless poor?

The justice they sought for the homeless, and for the prisoners with whom they continued to work, was not the justice of the system defined as the protection of individual rights to pursue self-interest. Instead, it was a justice based on more biblical and even classical civic traditions of the social nature of humans and the common good. Since all persons are members in the community, the justice of the community is measured by its treatment of the most vulnerable. The possession of excess, when other people in the community do not have enough for basic necessities, is unjust. A society structured to allow individual excess was systemically unjust and must be rejected.

Since, from their perspective, such a view of justice was far removed from the realities of American society, they realized that its acceptance would require a fundamental change in moral outlook and lifestyle. Instead of treating the needs of the poor with suspicion as a threat to self-interest, they would be viewed as needs we all share – both material and spiritual – which can only be met in a community based on trust, faith, and a sense of the common good. In an early interview with a local Catholic newspaper, Ed explained that they were trying to do this at Clifton in terms of the biblical call to justice and new life:

We take seriously the word “hospitality” and we are attempting to offer hospitality and not just shelter. Theologically, hospitality means to us trying to offer space where the men are not only sheltered and fed, but also are given friendship. And the basis for that is God’s friendship with us.

Consistent with this view of justice in which persons were simply accepted on the basis of their inherent dignity as persons created and redeemed by God, the shelter at Clifton imposed no rules of admission based on the criteria of “deserving” or “undeserving” poor. No identification was required, no questions asked, and a person could return as often as they wanted. Alcohol and other drugs were prohibited as their use could threaten the peace of the shelter. The shelter was to be a place where the homeless could be welcomed and feel at home.

Still, as Ed pointed out in the same interview, they found it difficult not to make judgments about the homeless persons who came to the shelter:

Our middle class heritage has taught us to distrust the poor as people out to freeload. So we are in a constant faith struggle.

The competitive outlook of Americans that sees people as either useful or useless, and judges people by social indicators of wealth and status was not easy to shake. Ed, Murphy, Rob, and Carolyn wanted to defeat this outlook by replacing it with a biblically based vision of human life.

Their moral vision had been sharpened in the struggles within the congregation at Clifton. It had led them to their work with the shelter and continued in their advocacy for other churches to open shelters. Still as they considered their shelter work at Clifton and their advocacy, it did not seem enough. They still saw their own lives as too fragmented, and too far from true solidarity with the poor. They were finding it remained difficult to break

the barriers between them and the poor as they had hoped. As they continued to study the Bible, the conviction deepened that biblical faith was always lived in community.

They also had before them the witness of past and present Christian communities. The Sojourners Community had long been influential in their thinking, and they also had contact with Catholic Worker houses, the Community for Creative Nonviolence, Koinonia Community in Americus, Georgia and a Cistercian monastery in nearby Conyers. Carolyn Johnson recalls that by the spring of 1980 they had come to a point in their work and discussions that:

...if we didn't form a community all the talking and the theology would have been very hollow. If we wanted to keep the integrity of our discussions and who we were as Christians, then forming a community had to be our next step.

The conviction now solidified that membership in a congregation could not provide sufficient support for the kind of Christian life integrated with every sphere of life they thought necessary to be faithful to the Gospel. Additionally, they had reached the point where their beliefs were strong enough to overcome their fears from their previous failed experiences with community.

On a Saturday in late May 1980, the four of them sat down together and wrote out what they intended their community to be. They scheduled a retreat for later that summer in Montreat, North Carolina where Murphy's family had a house. There they put the finishing touches on their covenant. On July 21, 1980 they signed it and the Open Door Community began. Ed had suggested the name of the community. It was based on John 10:1-10 in which Jesus refers to himself as the open door by which the sheep enter the sheepfold. The homeless and the imprisoned needed doors opened for them, and in Christ the founders of the Open Door hoped that as a community they would do this.

When Murphy, Ed, Rob, and Carolyn returned from their retreat they were unsure of the effect their decision to form a community would have on the Clifton congregation. They harbored the hope that the Open Door Community could somehow be incorporated into the life of the congregation, perhaps as a different type of membership in the church. It quickly became evident that this would not be the case. As the news spread of the forming of the Open Door, most members of the church expressed feelings of trepidation and uncertainty. A few were genuinely excited about the possibilities it might offer the congregation. Others saw it as a threat to the unity of the church. They worried that it would lead Ed to neglect his role as pastor. Finally, some simply thought the whole venture crazy and unnecessary.

The uncertainty soon extended to the four members of the fledgling Open Door Community. They were increasingly unsure of their roles within the congregation and the possibilities for remaining within Clifton. In the congregation there had been some significant aversion to the radical vision of the Gospel preached by Ed, and now that vision was embodied in a community associated with the church. Some resentment had also built up over the night shelter. Not everyone shared the enthusiasm of the Open Door Community members for this work and there was resistance to efforts to include the

whole church in the shelter work. Additionally, Ed and Rob were feeling scattered as they tried to balance full-time jobs with the demands of the new community and the responsibilities of the night shelter.

To address these concerns, the four community members decided to have a retreat in February 1981 at Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Abbey, the Cistercian monastery near Conyers. At this retreat, they reached the consensus that they should leave Clifton and find a place in Atlanta where they could live together, offer hospitality for the homeless, and continue the prison ministry. Ed would no longer pastor at Clifton and Rob would leave his job. They would all give themselves completely to the Open Door Community and its work. Ed summed up the motivation behind their decision:

We felt a new vocation emerge from our experience of serving God in the midst of the poor. We wanted to live with those we sheltered and we wanted to form an alternative style of Christian community – a residential community.

The covenant they had signed almost a year earlier proclaimed an integrity of life which they now believed could work only in an intentional Christian community. This community would stand apart from the mainstream of American society and its values. Its own life would provide strength for those who sought to resist this society, and for those who have been battered by it. The decision to leave Clifton surprised few in the congregation – some were quite relieved. Clifton's own vitality, nurtured in the ministry of Ed, Murphy, Carolyn, and Rob, continued after their departure. The church carried on with the night shelter work and remains an activist congregation.

Chapter Four: A New Community at 910

Soon after their decision to leave Clifton, the four members of the Open Door began to search for a place where they could live and work. They wanted a location where they could be in proximity to the homeless. The building needed to have enough space for a soup kitchen and plenty of rooms for community members and for the homeless folks they would invite to live with them. In late July, they found a place that they thought would meet their needs: the former Women's Union Mission at 910 Ponce de Leon.

Walking through the building with the director of the Union Mission, Ed and Murphy realized it was definitely big enough for the community and its work (some sixty rooms), though it was somewhat worn and old. The Ponce-Highlands neighborhood in which the building stood was in transition. There was a heady mix of small restaurants, bars, apartment buildings and cheap single room occupancy hotels, abandoned buildings and vacant lots, some small office buildings, and liquor stores. Near the downtown and several labor pools, it was an area frequented by homeless folks. The Union Mission was pleased to hear that the Open Door planned to continue a ministry with the homeless, and sold it to the community for \$150,000. The purchase was financed with money from the sale of Murphy and Ed's house, and with funds from the Atlanta Presbytery and other donors. The resources from outside the Open Door would continue to be crucial as they refused government funding and relied on the generosity of other people.

On December 16, 1981 the Open Door Community moved into 910. Once there, they faced the massive task of making the place habitable. There was need for extensive scrubbing and painting before it could become a home and a place of hospitality. Murphy recalls:

It was a major excavation. We battled roaches and grime. When my parents arrived for a Christmas visit, I met them at the back door with a jug of Clorox and a mop. My greeting, "Make yourself at home," had never rolled off my tongue with such specific intent.

On Christmas Day the Open Door Community initiated its work of hospitality in its new location with a dinner for one hundred prepared by two Atlanta gourmet chefs, Patrick Burke and Gary Kaupmann.

On January 30, 1982 the community opened its doors for its first soup kitchen. As in Catholic Worker houses of hospitality, the Open Door believes the serving of soup is a central act of hospitality, and the homeless who come to eat are welcomed "as Christ." On this first day, seventy-three people were welcomed and served. Another intentional Christian community, Jubilee Partners, located in nearby Comer, Georgia came and helped with the preparation and serving of the soup.

Don Mosely from Jubilee made enormous biscuits that were almost big enough to be a meal in themselves. Refugees from Cambodia now living at Jubilee also lent their hands in service. They were stunned by the numbers of people who lined up for food. It was an amazing day. Refugees from Southeast Asia with first hand experience of U.S. military

action and the warfare that continued even after the U.S. departure ladled soup into bowls for U.S. citizens. People from the “Third World” were helping to feed persons from the “First World.” The refugees had never expected to see such poverty in the United States, which they considered the richest country of the world.

By the end of February the soup kitchen was regularly serving over a hundred people. By May the community had enough volunteers and the resources to keep the kitchen open seven days a week. Since then, on every day of the year, the community opens its front door and invites those waiting outside to come in, sit down, and have a meal served to them. On several days throughout the year it is the only soup kitchen open in the city.

Homeless people came to live with the Open Door Community as soon as it moved to 910. They pitched in to help with the work as they had at the Clifton night shelter. In the early days, when the building was still being rejuvenated by community members, each person who came to stay at the Open Door cleaned the room he or she moved into. Robert Barrett had come with Rob, Carolyn, Murphy and Ed from Clifton, and soon Antonio Guillerme, Cuban born, was also invited to join them at 910. These were the first of the “house guests.”

As persons from the streets began to fill up the rooms, the new community started to work out some understandings of what they could expect from each other. With people coming from such diverse economic backgrounds, from different races, and different creeds, there were plenty of opportunities for misunderstanding and conflict. Mistakes were made, but there were also moments of grace when the community was surprised by love and life shared together. It was a struggle day by day to create some levels of order and an atmosphere of trust.

Ed tells the story of one young African-American man, Thony Lee Green, who was invited into the community shortly after it began. He was an especially enthusiastic worker and joined in with whatever task needed to be done. He mopped floors, carried in food donations and helped with the soup kitchen. He often cared for Hannah and Christina, feeding them or changing their diapers. He became intensely involved with the life of the community and came to profess a deep faith in Christ. All of this happened within two months of his arrival at the Open Door.

But it was only about two months more before Thony was violently taken from the community. One day, right before the soup kitchen was to open, the end came for Thony Lee Green’s life at the Open Door. As the soup line formed, Georgia Bureau of Investigation agents appeared. They jumped the hedges around the front porches and burst into the house with pistols drawn. In moments they had Thony Green face down on the floor with a gun to his head. Over Carolyn Johnson’s protests he was dragged from the house and driven off. No explanation was given and the officers refused to say where Thony was being taken.

After numerous phone calls they learned that he was behind bars in the Fulton County Jail. Thony Green, the community discovered, was a fugitive from St. John the Baptist Parish Jail in Louisiana. There he had been serving a sentence for an armed robbery at the

Bucket of Blood Tavern. Convicted on five counts of armed robbery, he was to serve consecutive sentences leading to an incredible total of 480 years in prison! After his capture Thony Green was sent to the Louisiana State Prison in Angola. Since his arrest, community members have once a year made the long drive to visit him. John Pickens, a volunteer with the community, has also sought legal recourse to reduce Thony's time in prison. Numerous appeals have failed, including one that made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

In addition to the work done by people from the streets, the community also relies extensively on volunteers to help prepare meals, serve soup, and aid in other tasks. Most of the volunteers who come to the Open Door on a regular basis are from local churches and schools. Some volunteers become more deeply involved with the life of the community by committing themselves to live and work at the Open Door for six months or longer. As with the house guests, a process began in the early days of the Open Door to establish the levels of trust and authority these resident volunteers would have in the community.

In their first month at 910, the Open Door Community also began a newspaper called *Hospitality*. Rob Johnson served as its first editor. The newspaper discusses the beliefs of the community, offers stories from their work with the homeless and imprisoned, and serves as a forum for advocacy on issues pertaining to homelessness, prisons and the death penalty. The first issue rolled off the presses in January 1982. It offered a brief self-description of the Open Door and explicitly drew connections between the situation of the homeless and prisoners and the community's work with them:

As we opened our doors to share hospitality with friends who are walled out, we found it necessary to share that same hospitality with women and men who are walled inside the prisons and jails of our state. God's good grace calls us to visit: a simple act of compassion where we meet again and again Jesus Christ, and learn of his suffering in a world filled with unforgiveness.

Central in the early editions of *Hospitality* is an issue which remains part of the Open Door's mission, advocacy for the opening of shelters in the city. We previously saw how several other churches had followed the lead of Clifton Presbyterian and opened night shelters. The Open Door Community continued to urge more churches to open their doors to the homeless, and to press the city to open shelters. In February 1982 a group of people who had helped begin shelters started to gather regularly on Tuesday mornings at the Open Door. Out of their discussions regarding shelters and the needs of the homeless the more formal organization of the Atlanta Coalition for the Homeless eventually emerged.

As the community became more settled in their surroundings at 910 their relationships with homeless folks revealed two more pressing needs. In the summer of 1982 the Open Door started to offer showers and a change of clothes on a limited basis. This became an almost daily service when a shower room specifically for this purpose was completed in December 1983. Members of the community started to regard the offering of showers, like the soup kitchen, as a place where Christ is met under the guise of the homeless. Ed, writing in *Hospitality*, likened the showers to baptism, calling them "another Kingdom

washing,” and explained “Washing, like eating, is related to the deepest mysteries of our sacramental communion with God in Christ. Showers and soup, shirts and sandwiches are offered and received here everyday. So is Jesus Christ.”

In December 1982 the Open Door added breakfast to the meals it would offer to the homeless. Community members had begun spending periods of time on the streets to learn first-hand the needs of homeless folks, and to gain some sense of the experience of homelessness. During one such time on the streets, Ed and a resident volunteer, Mary Himburg, visited the city-operated Day Labor Service Center. The Center was started by the city in response to businessmen who were concerned about the large number of people loitering downtown. Its purpose was to provide temporary employment for people and get them off the streets for at least the day.

As the Labor Center opened for another day, Ed and Mary met Alvin Dollar, its director. Dollar discussed with them what he saw going on in the labor pool and he told them of his pain in seeing people go off to a day of hard work on empty stomachs. Ed raised the possibility of the Open Door Community offering breakfast at the Center. Dollar’s response was enthusiastic. By the middle of December 1982 the community had enough volunteers and resources to begin the breakfast. At first, the breakfast was served only one day a week. In January of 1983 another day was added. At this point, city officials sent down a directive stating that the Day Labor Center was a place for people to get jobs, not a place for people to eat. The breakfast would have to stop, they said, because it interfered with the efficient operation of the labor pool. Dollar reluctantly told the Open Door the news.

The community, however, was determined to continue serving the breakfast. They simply moved their serving line into the street in front of the Center. The street’s name, Coca-Cola Place, witnessed to the paradoxes of the city of Atlanta. The product now served worldwide had begun on the same block where the Labor Center currently stood. The immense wealth generated through the selling of Coke had benefited Atlanta in numerous ways through the philanthropy of the Candler and Woodruffs who ran the company. But now the same city would not allow day laborers going off to minimum wage jobs to be fed by a volunteer group.

Alvin Dollar sought out the pastor of the Butler Street Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church which stood around the corner from the Center. He asked Pastor Tom Brown if the breakfast could be served in the church basement. Pastor Brown invited Ed to worship and meet with the Butler Street congregation. Soon after, the church board also met with Ed, and then approved the serving of the breakfast in the church basement. Members of the church also volunteered to help with the serving.

The next Monday the breakfast was moved from the streets to the basement, and soon, three more mornings were added with the help of volunteers from the church. By the end of January, the breakfast was being served Monday through Friday. For this breakfast, the Open Door Community prepares the meal of grits, hardboiled eggs, fruit slices, multi-vitamins and coffee at 910. Loaded onto a van, the food is transported to Butler Street

and served. Some two to three hundred people line up outside the church and wait to come into the basement to sit and eat.

During this first year the Open Door Community also engaged in actions that demonstrated its commitment to not only serve the poor with charity but to serve also by demanding justice. On November 11, 1982, the community held its first “street action.” This public protest was to dramatize the situation of the homeless in the city and call for the opening of shelters. A mock funeral was held at Woodruff Park in the heart of downtown Atlanta to raise public awareness of the homeless people who would die on the streets of Atlanta in the upcoming winter because of hunger, cold, and disease. Surrounded by the business towers, symbols of financial power, the community simply asked why people would be left to die of exposure in a city with such wealth. Atlanta had prided itself during the Civil Rights Movement as “the city too busy to hate.” The Open Door Community was asking if it was now “the city too busy to care.” Local newspapers covered the protest which eventually left the park to march to city hall where the community pressed its call to civic officials that shelters be opened.

The first year at 910 also brought some change to the prison ministry. The community continued the practice of providing transportation once a month to Hardwick Prison for the families of prisoners. The hospitality offered on the trip expanded significantly when the Milledgeville Presbyterian Church began serving lunch for the families and drivers. Writing letters and visiting prisoners on death row was also continued by the community. As appeals ran their course and the state of Georgia began to execute people again, the community responded by participating in public actions of protest against the death penalty.

During the Open Door Community’s first year at 910, the basic patterns of community life in solidarity with the poor emerged. The front door of the Open Door Community has become a place of gathering. Homeless folks gather for showers, for soup, and sometimes to catch a moment or two of sleep on the front steps. To the right and left of the door, two porches jut out toward the street. On hot summer days these are places of respite and relaxation. Community members gather for a bit of conversation, or sit back to read the daily paper. Inside the house, constant activity marks the day. The kitchen and dining room are rarely empty. Volunteers and community members begin at mid-morning, cleaning and slicing vegetables for soup. Steps at the back of the kitchen lead into the basement where food is stored. A side door in the basement leads to a public restroom – so necessary in a city that denies such facilities for the homeless. When the soup kitchen opens upstairs the dining room’s forty chairs fill rapidly. Hospitality, though, cannot be rushed and sometimes it takes a few hours before everyone in the line at the door is served.

Across the hall from the dining room is the living room, furnished with some old couches and chairs. Mailboxes take up part of one wall. Directly off the living room are several small offices. In the office nearest the door, a community member who is assigned “phone and door” hustles to keep up with calls and the flow of people at the door. Some are seeking help, looking for shoes or a clean pair of pants, or they might be stopping by to get their mail. Others who come to the door bring donations of food or clothing. In the

other rooms community members are involved with any number of tasks: putting together the latest issue of *Hospitality*, organizing the next trip to Hardwick prison, or rounding up volunteers for next week's soup kitchen.

Down the hall are the shower room and clothes closet. On specified weekday mornings some thirty people line up to wash off the grime of the streets and put on fresh clothes donated to the community. There are also rooms here for community members, and at the end of the hallway is a small laundry. Community members also live in the basement and in the upper floor of the house. All of the Open Door is furnished with donated furniture, giving the place a definite "lived in" look which is accented by the activity in the house itself.

Even a brief tour of the Open Door and its activity reveals the need for communal organization. Decisions have to be made about who is going to work and when. Times have to be scheduled for common prayer, renewal, and play. And behind this work and these schedules the community itself stands a group of people trying to live together with all their differences of temperament, education, culture, class, race, and gender. It is no easy task to weave together such a disparate group of people into a community where life can be shared.

Chapter Five: Growing in Life Together

The community, in order to share life, must have life to give. The soil in which this life grows is faith and commitment to Christ. Like a farmer who works the soil, the Open Door has over the years searched for ways of organizing the community that can offer the best promise for nurturing life in Christ. This growth within the community has often come out of painful experiences and soul-searching. The Gospel which inspires community life is often in tension with the institutional structures which are humanly necessary. In the history of the Open Door this tension has been experienced in both its work and its development of decision-making structures in the community.

The Gospel message of hope is based on the reality of God's saving activity in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This saving activity is manifest in human life when the powers of death are defeated, when the hungry are fed, the naked are given clothing, and the prisoner is visited or set free. Yet hope in this Kingdom is strongly challenged by the human suffering and death experienced on the streets and in prisons.

The lack of tangible progress or success in the community's work often leads to a deep sense of discouragement, and this has been an ongoing difficulty for community life. Rob Johnson, writing in *Hospitality*, gave voice to the gloom that had fallen upon the Open Door in late 1985. Simply maintaining what they had established in the four years since the beginning of the Open Door seemed to be draining away the community's life:

Our community is coming out of a difficult year – growing smaller. Overworked, re-evaluating our identity and structure, we have tried to slow down.

In this article he openly wondered about the future of the Open Door and its ability to continue with its work. Still he concluded, "We can only listen to God's call in our own lives and have integrity in our response."

Within the Open Door at this time there was a scarcity of resident volunteers to help with the work and one of the original partners in the community, Carolyn Johnson, had decided to leave. Carolyn's departure made several difficult issues for the community more explicit. Questions about work, authority within the community, and its organization were raised. Specifically, Carolyn and other community members were finding the emphasis on downward mobility and a life of solidarity with the poor had led almost to the exclusion of joy from the life of the Open Door. Faith in the presence of Christ in the poor was sorely tested by the daily realities of soup lines and prisons. Carolyn recalled:

I knew something was wrong when I would be at Bible study or listening to sermons and I'd feel like I knew what the next line was going to be. There didn't seem to be anything fresh; and there didn't seem to be any comfort. We didn't have any time for creativity, or for the parts in ourselves that weren't tied so deeply to the work that we were doing.

Although Rob Johnson continued in the community for about a year as a non-resident partner, he too ended up leaving the community. His reasons echoed Carolyn's:

For years I pushed myself in the things I wrote for Hospitality, and the ways I talked with people, to see life as a constantly downward pilgrimage. The cross and the crucifixion became central to the theology and lifestyle of the Open Door. They became too central, too emphasized. The balancing of a life of joy, and to experience in certain ways abundance, was difficult.

These concerns did not disappear with the departure of Carolyn and Rob. Instead, they began to push the community to rely more explicitly on prayer during the course of daily activities. The spirituality of the community needed to be more continuously nourished by set times for worship and for quiet relaxation. As I will detail in the following chapter, these times have become ever more central for sustaining the life of the community in the midst of its work.

But work is not the only place where the life of the community has met frustration and discouragement. It emerged also in the Open Door's structuring of authority. These questions have sometimes been seen as a direct threat to the professed convictions of the community. Community members believe that reconciliation in Jesus Christ makes possible the beloved community in which persons can live in the full dignity of redeemed humanity. For this reason full participation in the shaping of the life of the community by all of its members, whether from the streets and prisons or from middle class homes, has always been part of the community's faith conviction. The decision-making structure of the Open Door, however, has needed significant changes in order to more fully approximate this belief.

When the community began, the founders called persons from the streets and prisons who were invited to live in the Open Door "house guests." The founders called themselves the "partners" of the community. The distinctions implicit in these terms indicate some initial difficulty in structuring the community's belief in full membership for all based in Christ. The barriers of race and class were not easily wiped away. Persons invited into the community were not asked a number of intrusive questions about their backgrounds. They were simply asked into the house and expected to join in with the life and work of the Open Door.

This process requires a tremendous amount of trust. Stories such as that of Thony Green reveal not only the trust shared but also the risks involved in inviting relatively unknown persons into the community. In the case of Thony, a life-long friend was found. But in other cases, persons have sought to take advantage of the trust extended. The Open Door attempts to become a home where the streets and prisons can be left behind and persons can be restored to their full human dignity. After years of surviving based on mistrust, the process of healing, of learning to live in community, requires continuous effort by all persons involved.

Building on their early experiences the Open Door has slowly worked out some rudimentary understandings of the responsibilities of community members to each other

and to the work of the community. Still, there is no “rule book” handed out with laws to be followed. Instead a “pastoral friend” guides a newcomer in the practices of the community. New members learn that they can stay as long they want, if they accept the responsibilities of life in the community. Positively, that life means strong support for a person’s efforts to be renewed in human dignity that has been stripped away by life in the streets. From the harsh struggle to survive in the streets or in prison, one moves into a family which provides love, a secure place to live, and steady work.

But there are also changes demanded that are difficult for many. Those with alcohol or chemical dependencies are strongly urged to become involved with a rehabilitation program. Continued use of alcohol or drugs is not tolerated and results in the person being asked to leave the community. Partners and resident volunteers are also expected to abstain in solidarity with members who have addictions even though some moderate drinking outside of the house is tolerated. Members of the community from the streets or prisons also have to keep certain hours and generally do not have access to keys for the house doors. For these members of the community then, the Open Door can sometimes appear as somewhat less than open.

All who live in the community participate in its work and receive from the community their basic needs. The Open Door relies on donations for its material existence. Consistent with the partners’ desire that the community reflect the racial composition of the homeless and imprisoned, priority is given to African-Americans when a bed becomes available in the house. A kind of triage is also performed as the community especially seeks out those on the streets who are older or disabled. Although it is not set up to be a hospice, once a person is invited into the Open Door, the community stands with him or her even if a severe illness strikes. This has happened several times in the history of the community.

Most recently John Howard graced the community with his life and death. He came to the Open Door from the streets and was in the house only a short time before being diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer. Prior to his death he needed care around the clock. Members of the community sat at his bedside during the day and through the night. The experience profoundly affected those who waited and prayed with John. Like many from the streets, beaten down by society’s rejection, he questioned his own worth as a person and he could not make sense of a loving God through the suffering that marked his life. Shortly before he died however he rose in his bed and declared “God loves John Howard.” This story was soon shared with the whole community. No one could have guessed that when he was asked into the community he would teach them so much about living and dying.

The community’s funeral for John was held at Jubilee Partners. Also buried there are some who have been executed by the state of Georgia, and Harold Wind, another community member from the streets who died at the Open Door. Dick Rustay recalled that on Christmas Eve when John first joined the community in worship the Gospel proclaimed:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. (John 1:6-7)

The truth of this Gospel, Dick said, had been realized once again in the experience of the community. John had become more woven into the fabric of community life than perhaps either he or the community had initially envisioned. And he had brought to the community his own special vision of God gained in his long illness.

In other instances, the almost casual invitation to come and live with the community has resulted in a deep and loving commitment that has stretched over years of life together.

Ralph Dukes first met Ed and Murphy when he came to sleep at the Clifton night shelter. Ralph had grown up in nearby Decatur, and taught welding at Decatur High for several years. But as he has put it, “love of the bottle” led him to lose one job after another and he ended up on the streets. After the Open Door moved to 910 Ponce de Leon he frequented the soup kitchen, but his constant drinking seemed an insurmountable barrier to his ever living in the community. A resident volunteer new to the community invited him into the house. Those who knew Ralph’s history expected that he would last a few days before he would resume drinking and thus be asked to leave the Open Door. Some eight years later he is still a member of the community, offering help for the early rising Butler Street Breakfast cooks, setting the table for the soup kitchen, and discussing why the Atlanta Braves remain a losing ball team.

Of course, not every person invited into the community finds life there congenial. On occasion, persons have come and stayed for only one day. And sometimes there have been the very painful breaks when a person who has lived at the Open Door for a long time destroys his or her relationship with the community in some way and is asked to leave. Whatever the circumstances, those invited into the community from the streets or prisons have consistently shaped the life of the Open Door. Yet, over the years, the expectations of the community for members from the streets and prisons has undergone significant changes.

Membership in the community, as was mentioned above, can also take the form of being a “resident volunteer.” These volunteers live with the community and share in its work and faith for periods of six months or longer. They are typically white, middle-class and college educated. This group is made up of all age groups, though those in their twenties, or “second career” persons in their fifties, often predominate. Some have remained in the community and become partners.

Connected to these different ways of belonging to the community are different levels of responsibility for the ongoing life of the community. Those deeply committed to the Open Door need to have more authority than the less committed. This question of authority often touches a number of different concerns in the community, from the very serious to the almost trivial. Murphy recalls some the difficulties with decision-making in the early days of the community:

There were times in the community where there were some real debates about authority and leadership. For example, we had a debate about whether somebody who had just showed up and really didn't like to wash pots could share equally in authority.

The gap between Gospel commitments and community practice has led at times to disputes concerning the actual equality of membership within the community. Faced with such questions, the community initially developed three circles of decision-making corresponding to the three types of membership in the community. Murphy explains their rationale for this pattern:

We had reached a point of realizing people bring a variety of agendas to the Open Door; and most of them leave after a while. So while we were not going to be mean and harsh, we needed to be realistic. The partners are the only ones committed to being here next year and beyond. Therefore there are some things we could not sit up all night debating.

In this early structuring of the community, the partners formed the first circle of authority as the “leadership team” of the community. They made the long-term policy decisions affecting the continuation of the Open Door’s ministry. These decisions were made by consensus. Neither resident volunteers nor house guests attended meetings of the leadership team.

Resident volunteers were part of the second circle of authority. Along with the partners they participated in the “weekly ministries meeting.” Decisions in this circle addressed the daily operation of the community, such as work schedules. Here again consensus was the method of decision-making. Partners, however, reserved the right to decide if an issue fell into the area of long-term policy or not. If it was such an issue, then it was tabled until the next leadership team meeting.

The third circle of authority was the house meeting where partners, resident volunteers and house guests gathered to discuss and decide issues raised by the house guests. If a house guest raised an issue that might cause a change in long term house policy, the issue was either deferred to the next meeting of the leadership team, or one of the partners explained why that policy existed and would not change. Thus here again, decision by consensus was limited by the authority of partnership.

The relation of the three circles of authority and their corresponding levels of membership brought some needed order to the Open Door but it remained a sensitive topic for community members. At a house meeting in 1987 one house guest objected to this way of structuring decision-making. “I don’t know how you can have a real community when half the people here (the house guests) have no decision-making position.” Murphy responded by emphasizing that the house meeting was a decision-making body. Issues were brought up and decided upon at these meetings. But she also went on to stress the religious and moral basis for full membership:

House policy is formed out of the common discipline embraced by the partners and resident volunteers in response to the call of Jesus Christ. Decision-making authority comes out of that shared commitment. Since house guests do not share this commitment, they cannot fully share in the authority of the house.

Several house guests agreed with Murphy's position. At this point the responsibilities they had in the community fit their capabilities. They found a structure at the Open Door within which they could rebuild their lives. One stated:

The Open Door is a kind of sanctuary from the powers that beat us down, that put us on the streets and kept us there. I need rest more than I need responsibility right now.

The public discussion ended there. The house guest who had first raised the challenge said no more at the meeting. Instead within a month she had found work and left the community. Still some house guests and other members of the Open Door continued to discuss the concerns she had raised.

Shortly after this house meeting I asked Ed whether he thought the Open Door was essentially reflecting the same patterns of division found in society as a whole. He responded:

One of the ways I'm impressed with the power of evil is that after so many tries, and so many struggles, class structure still remains. I used to be embarrassed about the class distinctions between Jay (a house guest who later became a partner in the community) and me. But as I see what is going on in this society, it is radical that Jay and I live in the same house, that Jay and I eat at the same table, that Jay and I worship the same God. That's about as good as you can discover in North American society today. That doesn't mean I'm giving up and settling for that – I pray, I work, I try to repent of privilege and class-mindedness in my own life. But I'm not thinking now, as I was five, six, or seven years ago, that we're going to pull off a kind of equality and mutuality inside this house that we can't do outside this house. The world is too much here.

In recognizing this tension between Gospel and world within its own structure, the Open Door Community became both less self-righteous and more open to continuing conversion. The Kingdom of God is not fully present in the Open Door: class and racial divisions remain. But the reality of this Kingdom is undisputed and the community seeks to be faithful to that reality in a sinful world. This faithfulness requires living ever more closely to what the Kingdom both makes possible and requires: a loving community without division.

By the fall of 1988 these convictions led the community to begin shaping a new understanding of membership. The focus was on how the membership of house guests might become more complete. The partners decided to replace the label "house guests" with the rather cumbersome appellation "community members from the streets or prisons." This change was to signify that the community truly intended membership for

all who lived together at the Open Door. The new term still reflected some class distinctions, even as it indicated that all who lived in the community were members.

At the same time persons who had been “house guests” for over two years were asked if they wanted to have more responsibility in the life of the community. Since they had shared the life of the community for a sufficient length of time, they were seen as capable of becoming more active in decision-making. This led to a more inclusive idea of partnership. A person who had lived in the community for two years or longer; who planned to be around for the foreseeable future; and who actively shared in the life, work and worship of the community could become a partner. Enacting this policy, the leadership team invited six “members from the streets and prisons” to become partners: Jay Frazier, Ralph Dukes, Carl Barker, Willie Dee Wimberly, Willie London and Robert Barrett. In a festive service of worship the community welcomed and recognized their partnership in the Open Door. The leadership team became an administrative body within partnership. It no longer included all partners, but only those invited to leadership. Of the six new partners, only Jay Frazier stated interest in being on the leadership team and he was invited to join.

The other circles of authority also saw some change. In the fall of 1989 the entire community began to meet together on Monday afternoons to discuss the week’s work rotation and other issues of life together. This replaced the weekly ministries meeting that previously had been only for resident volunteers and partners. Community members from the streets and prisons now participated equally in the weekly organization of life. The monthly house meetings became a time for the community to gather for a special meal and sharing of music.

All of these changes have had a noticeable effect on the activity of both the new partners and the members from the streets and prisons. The new partners more frequently exercise leadership in the organization of the work of the community and participate more fully in its life, worship, and outside acts of protest. Several members from the streets and prisons have taken on more responsibilities in the house and are more assertive in their leadership in such work as the Butler Street breakfast or the soup or shower line.

This is not to say there is perfect equality for all persons living in the Open Door Community. The tensions have not completely disappeared. A community member from the streets recently observed:

I still see divisions here. They’re divisions of class. A new resident volunteer has more say than a guy from the streets who’s lived here for over a year.

Nevertheless he indicated a sense of membership in the community that might not have been possible before these changes:

There can’t be equality. People are different. At least here when you’re different, you’re still valued. You’re still treated like a person. The virtue of this place is that it shows we can live together – black and white, poor and privileged – if we

respect each other and give each other a chance. It isn't perfect. No place is. But it's better than any other place I've been.

Ralph Dukes, who became a partner but did not become part of the leadership team, expressed some ambivalence about the changes, even as he indicated his own strong sense of membership in the community:

I would have died on the streets if not for this place. Being called a partner now might just be a change in words. But to me it means I've survived and I'm living, and this is home for me.

From the perspective of those partners who did not come from the streets or prisons, these changes have meant a new perspective on their place in the community. Elizabeth Dede, who had first come to the Open Door as a resident volunteer after graduate studies in English and later became a partner, wrote:

I had lived and worked with Jay, Carl, Willie, Willie Dee, Ralph and Robert for three years, yet I hadn't recognized fully their partnership with me; I hadn't seen completely how they were my family. Acknowledging their partnership publicly was my first step towards sight, and now I know that I had been blinded by the things that make me different from these new partners: my education, the color of my skin, my comfortable existence, and the privilege to choose to come to the Open Door. But with the eyes of faith, given to us by our brother Jesus, we can see Jesus in everyone, and so recognize our partnership together.

These changes thus brought the community closer to their own convictions of membership based on the presence of Jesus in all, and on the common sharing of life in Jesus. The realities of divisions caused by sins such as prejudice and economic injustice prevent immediate equality and mutuality. But through sharing in a life formed by practices imbued with the spirit of Christ, people are able to slowly overcome these divisions. In this manner there is a continual seeking for community in which all participate, not only by sharing in the benefits and burdens of community life, but also by sharing in the decision-making that distributes those benefits and burdens.

By creating such a place, the members of the Open Door Community have provided a space in which persons from the streets and prisons, along with people from society's mainstream, can reclaim their humanity which was beaten down by the larger society. The strength of that larger society and its political and economic systems intrudes into the Open Door. That intrusion is illustrated dramatically in the story of Thony Green. Less dramatically, it is seen in the daily battles to overcome class and race divisions that linger in the community itself. In both cases, it is the faith of the community that gives it the strength and hope to continue resisting such intrusions even when it seems humanly impossible to do so.

Chapter Six: The Spirituality and Ethics of the Open Door Community

When the Open Door Community settled in at 910 Ponce de Leon, its own spirituality and ethics began to develop and to become more distinctive. This involved not only the formation of certain practices necessary for community order but also the continued evolution of the community's spirituality and ethics. A more definitive structure could be given to the life of faith the community envisioned as an alternative to the values dominant in American society.

The move to 910 symbolized Murphy's, Ed's, Carolyn's, and Rob's break with middle class life and with a mainstream Protestantism that was closely associated with American culture. They saw this break and the struggle it entailed as a response to God's call in the Scriptures to conversion and liberation. For them, conversion to life in God's Kingdom meant joining in the liberating work of Jesus Christ.

Within the Open Door, members of the community continue seeking to embody a life lived in response to God's call to live with the poor. Those who come to the Open Door find a group of people from diverse backgrounds and circumstances who want to more fully live in the presence of a liberating God. Still this liberation involves struggle, both internally and externally. The Exodus story helps to inform the community's struggle. The Israelites freed from slavery in Egypt still sometimes longed for the fleshpots left behind. For the middle class members of the community, the "fleshpots" often take the form of their old standards of success and respectability or the desire for control. For members from the streets and prisons, they can take the form of old addictions. The community sees liberation as a process of conversion and it recognizes the continuous need for a fuller commitment to the life God offers.

It is the covenant of the Open Door Community which gives the clearest written expression of the faith the community intends to live and the structures it sees as necessary for this life. This is not a systematic statement of their spirituality and ethical vision, yet it clearly indicates the community's direction.

The covenant opens with the proclamation: "Jesus Christ is Lord!" The heart of the covenant is a faith commitment to the biblical God who in love calls persons to form community. The Scriptures reveal this God as One who comes into the life of the community as the stranger, the poor, the oppressed. In the dining room of the Open Door hangs a Fritz Eichenberg print called "The Christ of the Breadline." Underneath the print is the poem:

I saw a stranger yestreen,
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place,
And in the name of the blessed Triune,
He blessed my house and myself,
My cattle and my dear ones.

And the lark said in her song:
often, often, often,
The Christ comes in the stranger's guise,
often, often, often,
The Christ comes in the stranger's guise.

Central to the community's life is the conviction that the presence of God is encountered in the homeless person and in the prisoner on death row.

The community manifests this belief, first of all, in its standing in solidarity with the poor. Proximity with the poor separates the community from the governmental and corporate values of competitive individualism and bureaucratic efficiency which dominate American society. Their practices of voluntary poverty and service give community members a different perspective on the American way of life. This stance with the poor is expressed in the community's ethos. Members maintain a simple lifestyle. They wear donated clothing and receive only a small stipend each month for incidental expenses. The Open Door gathers into the community people from the streets and prisons. And it is a public advocate for the poor, the homeless and the imprisoned. Instead of seeing issues from the position of those in power and who benefit from the current system, the Open Door attempts to see from the position of those who suffer in this society. Everything the community does is evaluated from the perspective of how it will effect the homeless and imprisoned. In the same manner the Open Door advocates that social policy be evaluated according to its effect on the most vulnerable in society.

The community finds biblical grounds for this stance with the poor. It discerns in the Bible a God who sides with the poor, liberates the downtrodden from oppression, and enjoins hospitality for the stranger. The community consistently turns to Matthew 25 as a key text for its life. In the homeless and the imprisoned, especially those imprisoned on death row, the Open Door finds the poor who are most destitute and the strangers who are most scorned by our society. These are persons rejected and judged by a system that bases human value on individual success in economic competition, and thus makes conspicuous consumption the mark of personal worth.

The Open Door Community rejects this system and its verdict on the homeless and death row prisoners. Their position is informed by the biblical conviction that these are persons worthy of love despite what they have done or failed to do, just as God loves us and saves us despite our unworthiness. Instead of seeing homeless and imprisoned persons as useless and offensive, they see them as Jesus Christ. This faith conviction is a decisive component in the community's solidarity with the poor. In numerous articles in *Hospitality*, and conversations with members of the community one continually finds the phrase: "in the faces of the stranger and the prisoner we see the face of Jesus Christ." Elizabeth Dede writes:

...the question "Lord, when did we see you?" is a question central to our faith because seeing, recognizing, and understanding are acts of faith as we live in the post-Ascension world. Jesus has left this earth, and we can see him now only with the eyes of faith.

Often at the Open Door we read Matthew 25 and ask the question, “Lord, when did we see you?” In the answer to that question... we find a clear explanation of our calling and work: to be faithful to the risen Christ we must feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, receive strangers in our home, give clothes to the naked, take care of the sick, and visit the prisoner.

The homeless and the imprisoned are sacramental for the Open Door Community. In these strangers God is present in a special way. Ed explains what this means for the community:

The reality and the presence of God is mediated through the presence and suffering of the poor. So as we live our lives in solidarity with the poor, we are able to discover who God is; and God’s reality, changing reality, confronting reality is mediated to our lives and calls us to new life which has two foci: life together in community and servanthood.

Seeing Christ in the homeless person, and in the prisoner, the Open Door affirms the dignity and worth of these persons as creatures of God who share in the redemption of Jesus Christ. Murphy emphasizes the centrality of the redemption in the community’s understanding of its commitment to these persons:

Death row is one more ragged edge of our torn world where we must take a stand for life. It is a matter of worship: worship of the God of Life, the God of Hope, the God of Peace, the God of Redemption. It is not a stand to be taken out of myopic sentimentalism. While people are at times wrongly accused and sentenced to die, death row is not a place where we frequently encounter “innocent suffering.” It is a place that pushes us to the depths of our belief in God’s redeeming power. We acknowledge with Paul that “we have all sinned and fallen short,” and we claim only the power of Christ’s redeeming love for our salvation. We claim no less for our sisters and brothers on death row. In so doing we meet the Christ who suffered and died for all of us.

Here it is also evident that the community also rejects any sentimentality about the poor, the homeless or the imprisoned. Such sentimentality is inadequate because it does not take seriously the evil human beings are capable of perpetrating.

A strong faith is necessary to confront the strength of evil without acknowledging it as the ultimate power in human life. Such faith does not have an easy optimism about progress and the perfectibility of the human race, but neither does it allow a self-indulgent despair. This kind of faith is confirmed in the experiences of the Open Door. Murphy writes:

We are not indulged in the luxurious illusion of “progress.” Our friends from the streets are more likely to get older, sicker, and even die than to “get themselves together,” get jobs, have their own homes, to – if you will – be “rehabilitated.” Of our friends in prison, a few make it out of the cycle of despair and death. Many do not.

Optimism is easily disappointed. It can as easily become twisted into extreme acts of repression to force people to meet standards of perfection. When that repression is turned inward people often burn out in their work with the poor. Ruth Allison, a former partner in the community, reflects that in her experience:

The Open Door is a trial by fire for everybody who lives here. It either turns people into crispy critters and they leave, or it is a very purifying fire promoting love. I don't see that this fire ever stops. It is no better for Ed and Murphy after almost a decade than it is for a new resident volunteer. The struggle is with different issues, but it is no easier. And in some ways it can be more difficult because once you start on this journey the ante just keeps upping and upping.

This underscores the need the community has for a Christian realism which sees a common, shared need for forgiveness and love in human life. Murphy states:

How difficult to hear the word that the Gospel calls us to be failures. After all, what are we to expect when we are invited to follow a homeless wanderer whose best friends were uneducated fisherfolk, prostitutes, and other misfits.

It is hard to learn that salvation comes not because our work builds steady progress toward the coming of God's kingdom, but because God is full of love and grace for us and the whole creation. Perhaps one reason that God calls us to love the poor is because the reality of the poor mocks our assumptions about progress and success.

Recognizing the failures and sinfulness of humanity and at the same time the grace made available to all in Jesus Christ, both the homeless and the imprisoned are welcomed by the community as fellow human beings worthy of respect as persons. In this manner despair, fear and vengeance can be set aside and the beloved community can be built in which the fullness of life is shared.

Ed develops this further by explaining the social implications of the Christian doctrine of justification by faith. He provides a corrective to the individualistic interpretations of this doctrine held by many Christians. Justification by faith, he begins, severs our reliance on our works to attain righteousness and salvation. The social ramifications of this belief are clear:

Since "none are righteous, no not one," no person can say, "I am better." No one can say, "I deserve more because I am more talented, or I have worked harder." No one can say "I am more important because I own more, or I am more educated, or I hold this position in society." Given this radical equality in the eyes of God, we as Christians must avoid erecting barriers, and avoid creating and supporting inequalities of wealth, class, status. We must, if rich, understand that our wealth comes from others and belongs to all who are in need. We must always work against the structures, the institutions in our society that place one above the other in terms of human dignity and worth. We do not all seek to be the same, rather we work to prevent the using of our differences to justify structures

of dominance and oppression which place people in categories, and then conclude that people in certain categories do not count.

The prayer and work of the community sustains these beliefs. What the community wants to become in the presence of God and what the community does in its work cannot be separated. God's call is comprehensive. The compartmentalizing of life into church, family, work, leisure, and politics is resisted by placing all of life under the call of God. One ethic guides the community's actions in all of these settings. God is Sovereign over all of life.

The covenant of the Open Door calls for a community which structurally supports the unification of these spheres under the biblical ethic. As the covenant states, "money, possessions, work, meals, parenting, worship, recreation and forgiveness" are to be shared. There is to be "a Spirit-led order" in their lives manifested in how they "earn income, use money and other resources, structure use of time, express ourselves verbally, express our sexuality, eat and drink, choose our living space and play."

One aspect of this wholeness is an emphasis upon life being shaped by shared communal practices rather than on rules posted and followed. Ruth Allison expresses the efforts of the community to resist simply becoming another institution:

We don't just put up signs to organize the soup kitchen. Each person that comes in is greeted and directed to a place at one of the tables. We try to develop relationships with the people we serve. When we pray, it is not about the "homeless problem." The focus instead is on persons – on the needs of individual persons who come to us. This isn't always easy in the face of the numbers who come to our door. And sometimes it would be easier to become angry or depressed or to dismiss someone as a hopeless case.

The covenant of the community describes the community's specific works as Spirit-filled embodiments of the call to "a ministry of hospitality and visitation." The Spirit sustains the community's witness "to life and hope in places where walls and closed doors have blocked that hope: in the prisons of Georgia where people are walled in; in downtown Atlanta where street people are walled out."

This unifying of spirituality and ethics is evident in the holding together of spiritual discipline and prayer with service and social activism. In an interview with a local Catholic paper, Ed echoes the advice of Thomas Merton to activists:

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his or her work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his or her work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.

The way to prevent this kind of activism, Ed explains, is to keep one's activism grounded in prayer.

The activism of the community must be rooted in spiritual discipline. Work with the poor which is not spiritually based can lead to hatred of the poor – patronizing the poor. In the pressure of the activist life the first thing you give up is prayer. One reason I advocate community life together is so we may be alone with God.

Thus the covenant states, “As sisters and brothers we covenant to submit to a daily discipline based on scripture and prayer.”

This kind of wholeness helps the Open Door Community resist taking on the qualities of social workers in a welfare bureaucracy: categorizing persons and putting procedures before relationships. In contrast, prayer sustains the love necessary for personal relationships with the homeless or with prisoners. Ed observes:

In the absence of love, and in specialization, people become objects – objects of our specialty. Marx’s insight about the worker being alienated from their work can be applied here. When we become alienated from our work, what we produce is seen only as an object over against us. In the same way, I could see the poor only as objects to be manipulated, and so come to despise the very people I hope to love.

Prayer renews the community in the love of God which makes possible love for each other and for the stranger. As Murphy puts it:

What we give is rooted in love because of God’s hospitality for us. We are not a social service agency. We all are on the receiving end. We are all outsiders made into community, family, friends through Jesus Christ. The basis for this is seen in Second Corinthians where Paul writes that through Jesus all enemies are made friends of God. Friendship comes from God. We don’t give that friendship, but receive it and share it. Then in Matthew 25 we read that when we feed the hungry, we feed Jesus Christ. The way we treat the dirtiest, hungriest, smelliest, drunkest person is the way we treat God.

The realization of the centrality of prayer and worship for the on-going life of the community has grown over the years. From the outset the community has celebrated the Lord’s Supper every week. Bible study too has been a constant feature of life at the Open Door. But daily shared prayer and retreats for the whole community have in the recent past become regular features of community worship. The Open Door came to realize that an exclusive focus on their work could destroy the spirit needed to sustain them in that work.

Before going to serve at Butler Street, before the soup kitchen, and before lunch and supper, members of the community form a circle and join their hands in prayer. Prior to serving others, members of the community remind each other whom it is they serve. It is Christ under the guise of the poor. For this opportunity thanks is given. Often there are also prayers for strength or patience or compassion. These come out of experiences in which tempers flared, or violence threatened in the serving lines. When you face

someone who is angry at being hungry and homeless, it is not always easy to see Christ in that person.

The period of prayer before community meals is a time to share scripture, concerns, and thanks for the good of the day. C.M. Sherman, a partner in the community who came from the streets, sees this as space in which:

...members can assemble daily to call upon each other to share concerns, sorrows, burdens, and weaknesses, while calling upon the Lord to intervene and help shape our lives. It is a measure to attain a quality of life of joy through commitment to the Gospel, and to resist not only the sins of the world, but also the sins of our individual selves. We attempt to nullify the effects of those divisions of race, class, and background through working, sharing, and playing together. We hope for mutuality in Christ.

Another space where this kind of prayer is fostered is at Dayspring farm. Located near Ellijay, a small town several hours north of Atlanta, Dayspring provides a place where the community can gather away from the noise of the city and the pressures of their work. Once a month, community members gather at Dayspring in order to relax together, to pray, and to play. An old farmhouse, a weather-beaten barn, fields, woods, a stream, and a small lake create a place far removed from the traffic, asphalt, and sometimes stifling heat of 910 Ponce de Leon.

Elizabeth Dede, reflecting on Dayspring, writes of how the name for the farm came from the Advent song “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” A verse from the song states, “O Come, blest Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by your advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death’s dark shadows put to flight.” Elizabeth explains that the first retreat at Dayspring came during Advent after a year in which:

...five of our friends on death row had been killed; some enthusiastic and hopeful members of the community had left in a sense of sadness and breakdown; and Hannah (Ed and Murphy’s daughter) had survived a serious accident. During that Advent it didn’t seem that the Dayspring was about to dawn on our community.

Yet, she continues, at that time of retreat, as at Butler Street or in prison visitations, the Dayspring did come in the realization that Christ “shares our burdens and problems.” Elizabeth concludes:

For two weeks in May, I did my morning devotions on the front porch of the house while the sun rose over the hill. Quite literally the Dayspring shone on me, even as Christ’s light was allowed to shine in me through prayer and meditation – something that I don’t do enough of back in the city. As we rest and recreate together, share the Lord’s Supper, and wash each other’s feet, then we remember and experience and are conscious of Christ, the bright Dayspring, shining on us and sharing both the joy and the bitter sadness of our hearts.

The footwashing Elizabeth refers to comes during the Lord's Supper shared during the community retreat. Traditionally practiced by many Christian churches on the Thursday of Holy Week, this ritual has become for the Open Door an important expression of their service to one another in the community. That doesn't mean, however, that it is always practiced with a somber solemnity. Smiles and laughs often emerge during the washing. A few community members remember when Gabriel Cole-Vodicka, a baby at the time, sat down by the water and splashed himself from head to toe with great delight. Someone suggested that perhaps he felt like Peter who had told Jesus: "Lord, do not wash only my feet, then! Wash my hands and head, too."

The holistic approach of the Open Door in which the encounter with God in prayer is the ground for its work with the homeless and imprisoned is also manifest in its holding together charity and justice. Ed writes, "The Open Door Community resists the split within the camp of the socially concerned between those who seek to aid hurting persons and others who fight to change the systems of abuse and injustice." He calls this split "the charity-justice polarity, or the band aids versus root causes approach." He sees charity as the basis for the work of justice, just as prayer is the basis for activism. "Charity," Ed states, "is the fulfillment of justice since when Jesus returns charity will characterize our lives and the demands of justice will be finished." Concretely, charity reduces the distance between the persons of money and the poor. In this way charity becomes the basis for friendship, for the beloved community of which Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke. Ed writes:

The beloved community, for which we all work and toward which the path of peace and justice leads, is one in which we are all friends. Sleeping with the homeless, eating with the hungry, waiting with the convicted, putting a band aid on an open sore, create wonderful friendships.

He finds charity and friendship come full circle with prayer as "A life of charity receives more than it can give; and the gift given is the immediacy of the presence of God." And Ed finds the presence of God with the poor as the basis for the a commitment to justice: "The energy for the long haul battle with the powers and principalities of death comes from life among, with and on behalf of the poor." In the holistic moral vision of the Open Door Community, to separate justice from charity is to separate the motivation and means for doing justice from the actual doing and end of justice. The sort of person one becomes through specific practices of prayer and charity is crucial in deciding one's actions. In order to do justice one must become just. The separation of intention and act destroys the integrity of the person.

Thus the Open Door view of justice stands in contrast to the more utilitarian or contractual views common in American society and its political and economic institutions. The utilitarian position relies upon a cost-benefit analysis. Social policy emerges from calculation: what policy will produce the greatest good for the greatest number. The contractual approach places the protection of individual liberties (summarized as rights) ahead of social obligations. The underlying assumption is that individual self-interest will produce societal good. From the perspective of the Open Door Community both of these approaches are deficient. They both neglect a crucial

question that ought to shape political and economic decisions. How will a particular social policy affect the most vulnerable in our society? Since we are bound together as human beings, none of us can really be well off if any number of us continues to suffer.

There are personalist and communitarian convictions in the vision of justice held by the Open Door. The community works against efforts to make homeless persons into statistics and persons in prisons into numbers, or to reduce human motivation to self-interest. Statistics and numbers are easily dismissed. They do not have human dignity, and therefore do not have just claim to common goods. Dostoyevsky has powerfully written about how depersonalization can make it easier to live with injustice. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov reflects on the suffering and death he sees in Russian society:

Anyway, to hell with it! Let them [die]! That's how it should be, they say. It's essential, they say, that such a percentage should every year go – that way – to the devil – it's essential so that the others should be kept fresh and healthy and not be interfered with. A percentage! What fine words they use, to be sure! So soothing. Scientific. All you have to do is say "percentage" and all your worries are over. Now, of course, if you used some other word – well, then perhaps it would make you feel a little uncomfortable.

This morally numbing use of percentages and statistics supports the idea that there is no moral appeal beyond the individualistic pursuit of interests that can be quantified. In politics this is manifest in the emphasis on procedural rather than substantive justice, and in regarding every issue as a contest of interest groups in which the best-funded wins. In the economic sphere the only legitimate basis for action is the pursuit of private interests as far as possible. The only limit is the law which protects the freedom of others to similarly pursue their interests.

The Open Door Community sees an American society that is divided by class, race, and gender, and in which there is oppression and injustice based on those divisions. Ed Loring states, "In society the most important dimension in social relationships is class. The single most important factor is class, then race, then gender." Homelessness, imprisonment, and capital punishment are symptoms of the depth of division and oppression in American society. These are legitimated by the cultural values of cost-benefit analysis and competition which are institutionalized in the American economy and political process.

From the perspective of the Open Door Community, the poor are deprived of life by those in power who make economic and political decisions that benefit only themselves. In standing with the homeless, the Open Door Community has learned, as Ed Loring writes:

Homelessness is absurd. Homelessness is unnecessary. Homelessness is hell...Homelessness is dereliction, frostbitten toes, crooked and lost fingers...What do you do when you have nothing to do? Something? Then you know little of the spiritual and political plight of the 8,753 boys and girls, women

and men who roam downtown Atlanta to the chagrin of Central Atlanta Progress and the horror of the Chamber of Commerce and the dread of the banker who just sold one more risk-free bond for the development of Underground Atlanta, where doctors and lawyers and business people will soon be able to “do anything they want” and never have to see, touch, hear, smell, or taste the slowly dying lives and bodies of the homeless. What we have learned in modern America is that to have the poor available and ready is a social good for the well-to-do: that is when we want them as a source for blood plasma and for medical research or the manufacture of medicines, and as bodies for teaching hospitals, and as an ever-ready large pool of cheap labor. However, to have them present in our lives as anything other than objects for our benefit is bad for business and a blight upon our pleasure. Therefore, we will not feed the hungry in a land that produces so much food that it pays farmers not to farm; nor will we build houses for the homeless in a nation that has more than enough construction supplies to house everyone in our land.

The Open Door sees the exploitation of the poor for the purposes of the powerful grounded in the cultural mix of utilitarian and contractarian approaches to human life. The economy and the political order institutionally express these forms of self-interest. From these spheres of influence the fundamental assumption that individuals have no shared basis for cooperation comes to dominate all of social life. The moral vision of the Open Door, in creating an alternative community, rejects this assumption and instead stresses our common humanity under the one God who creates and redeems us.

Social critic Philip Slater in *The Pursuit of Loneliness* describes how this institutionalized self-interest supports what he calls the “Toilet Assumption” in our culture. Since self-interest is a value which is socially rewarded, we do our best to avoid facing problems that would require costly regard for others. Instead social problems are eliminated by flushing them out of sight. The old, the poor, the mentally unbalanced, and minorities are placed in “institutional holes where they cannot be seen.” When these sewers back up, a “special commission” is formed to investigate the problem and propose solutions. The solutions inevitably suggest new institutional holes (a better toilet) or fine tuning those that already exist (fix the plumbing). Since the commission members are drawn from those who profit from the system, it is never fundamentally challenged.

The homeless are perhaps a classic example of how the toilet assumption works. Numerous task forces and commissions on the homeless have been formed, and new bureaucracies created and staffed by professionals, to address the “problem.” None of these suggest any fundamental re-evaluation of American values or the reworking of the economic system. This comes as no surprise to Ed:

I just don't think the way you help the poor is by playing with the rich. It's one of the myths of democratic society that insures the further development of the middle class. I think one thing that is lacking in our society is a recognition that one of the root causes of poverty is wealth.

Historically this is evident in how the homeless have been ignored by American society. The early distinction social work made between “worthy” and “unworthy” poor continues. Lines are drawn between those who deserve society’s help because they are judged capable of being made “useful” to society, and the poor who deserve poverty because of their personal or racial qualities. For a long time the homeless were categorized as unworthy poor and simply dismissed as winos, bums, vagrants – social nuisances – a police problem, not a social problem worthy of public attention. More recently, a similar distinction is made between those who are “homeless by choice” and those who are not, and therefore can be helped. The former are still a police problem (with drugs now added to the list of addictions), while the latter need to be re-institutionalized (as they are mentally ill) or given temporary support until they are able to make it on their own again.

Behind this distinction lies an individualistic assumption in American society. This individualism explains all the social casualties of the capitalist economic system as personal failures. As *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* newspaper columnist Dick Williams recently put it, homelessness is primarily “an individual problem, not a capitalist system run amok. We have individuals who drink and snort [cocaine] and forsake all responsibility.” Such problems are personal, he concludes. They cannot be traced, as the Open Door asserts, to social hopelessness and despair based on economic and political powerlessness. These people are “homeless by choice” and should be housed in jails, while “the deranged homeless” should be housed in mental institutions. Those who attempt to blame “Reaganomics” for the increase in homelessness in America are written off by Williams as part of the “radical left,” and as “provocateurs of our national guilt trip.” He dismisses those who raise up systemic causes of homelessness as off target and out of touch with reality.

The Open Door believes we find it difficult to break out of such views of the homeless because our political and economic institutions are structured in accord with the values of competitive self-interest. Mark Harper, a resident volunteer, saw a powerful example of this institutionalized self-interest when he spent twenty-four hours on the streets. There he sought, consistent with the convictions of the Open Door Community, to view things from the perspective of the poor. During some of this time he stayed with a few homeless people who had sought shelter in a crawl space under the First National Bank Tower in downtown Atlanta. He described the bank building as symbolic of the national values of the pursuit of wealth and security. His conclusion was that being in the crawl space:

...provides a much better lens through which to view the reality of our world than, say, any one of the windows of the tall buildings that rise around it. In fact, is there not an inherent danger that people will be pulled away from a necessary sense of our brokenness when they become engaged in the enterprise of any institution (from banks to a great many churches) that offers competition as a primary frame of reference?

As long as individual competition remains a fundamental value, the recognition of our common humanity and the consequent moral imperative to judge social systems and

decisions by their impact on the vulnerable will be lacking. The toilet assumption will continue to work.

The Open Door finds a similar assumption at work with the poor (many of whom in Atlanta and the South are African-American), who end up in disproportionate numbers in prison and on death row. Execution, of course, is the ultimate toilet. Society attempts to flush away those it considers crap, those who are beyond redemption. Like the homeless who become non-persons through their lives on the streets, the prisoner on death row is depersonalized. They are portrayed by prosecutors and the media as inhuman and deserving to die. Through the routine of prison life and its rituals of degradation, they are daily reminded that they are persons undeserving of any respect or care.

In the moral vision of the Open Door Community, divisions along race, class and gender lines, and the depersonalization these foster, are wrong because they go against God's intent for humanity expressed in creation and redemption. The community's analysis of economic and racial factors regarding homelessness and the death penalty is drawn from both leftist political theory and theological sources. These sources lead them to reject any simple moralistic condemnation of the homeless person or inmate. Fundamental to the Open Door's position is biblical faith which holds persons responsible for one another because they are created, judged, and redeemed by the one God. Persons have moral claims on one another because of their common creation by a loving God. For this reason, persons cannot be reduced to numbers. People are not to be treated as percentages in a cost-benefit analysis. Further, the community rejects a reduction of human motivation to calculating self-interest.

The Open Door finds its motivation and its life in its faith in God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. As Creator of all, God gives to human life certain fundamental imperatives which define what is necessary for human life to be good and worthwhile as human. These include such basics as food, clothing, shelter, and participation in work and rest. To deny these to persons is to deny their membership in the human race as it is intended by God. As Judge, God calls everyone to account for their stewardship of earthly goods in providing for these basic goods, and for their actions of inclusion or exclusion of persons in human society. As Redeemer, God works to heal the brokenness in human life caused by self-regard in relationships and the misuse of God's created gifts. In response to this reconciling work of God made manifest in Jesus Christ, everyone is called to embody in their lives this reconciliation, and to seek to rectify injustice and heal the wounds of injustice. Since for the Open Door this God is the God of all, these are public moral claims. God makes these claims on everyone. It is the specific task of Christians to witness to life as intended by God, and to share this life with the world.

In a *Hospitality* article titled, "All God's Children Gotta Have Shoes," Ed gave an eloquent summation of this shared life as he reflected on the feet of Lonnie Moss. Lonnie was a house guest, in the hospital, dying of cancer. As Ed sat at the end of the hospital bed, he noticed Lonnie's feet deformed from years of bad shoes and neglect. Such deformation, Ed wrote, was not part of God's intention for the world. With this in mind, he outlined how redemption reasserts the intention of God in creation, while as Judge, God continues to resist injustice:

That “all God’s children got shoes” is a vision of hope, a prayer for the coming of Thy Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven! Shoes are not only necessary items for survival and health; shoes are also symbols of human dignity and social justice. Until each of us has warm, dry, and comfortable shoes, the feet of God shall ache. Where there are those without good shoes, there is injustice in the system and deep terrible pain among those who suffer shoelessness.

The Open Door Community, for these reasons, sees making public the moral claim to the good of shoes while also providing shoes now as part of its hospitality for the homeless. Both of these – justice and charity – are integral to sharing in the life of God. One resident volunteer acting in this spirit took the shoes from of his own feet one morning and gave them to a man who showed up shoeless for breakfast at Butler Street.

Consistent with this vision of life and justice is the community’s belief in nonviolence. Because community members believe in the liberating power of God, they criticize forms of power ordered toward domination instead of justice, and they reject any involvement in power that uses violence. The community sees biblical grounds for this nonviolence in the example of Jesus and it also points to the witness of the early church and Anabaptist streams in the Christian tradition. As Jesus went to the cross for the sake of the Kingdom, and as the early Christians suffered martyrdom for their faith, so Christians today cannot use violence to bring in the kingdom. Murphy Davis writes, “Our vocation as Christians is always to stand as witnesses to life. We must be about the tasks of healing and restoration rather than revenge and further violence.” The conviction of the community is that God’s redeeming love must break the cycle of violence.

The nonviolence of the community should be understood not only as a political method, but also as integral to their moral vision and way of life. Nonviolence as a way of life includes self-examination to uncover the violence harbored within. There persons come face to face with their connection to the violence of the world. Here again is that aspect of the community’s moral vision which has a realistic awareness of the sin present in human existence. Robert McGlasson, a volunteer for the community, wrote in *Hospitality*:

We see that the lies told by the politician or the lawyer are rooted in the same dishonesty and deception that we practice in our own lives; that the racial prejudices harbored by our suspicious neighbors are our own prejudices; that the violence on the streets of our cities, or within our families, is our own hostility and violence; that the hatred, division, and death that is perpetrated by our churches and our governments is the same violence and hatred and ill-will we plant, cultivate and harvest each day in our own hearts.

From this recognition of connectedness to those who do violence, McGlasson argues, “Our own hearts begin to change from hatred and misunderstanding to love and knowing compassion.” This first step prepares the way for the suffering involved with nonviolence. Nonviolence opens one to a radical vulnerability to adversaries. Since nonviolence means non-cooperation with all forms of violence, it rejects the meeting of violence with more violence. McGlasson points out that this is not passive cooperation with violence, but rather active non-cooperation. Such non-cooperation can only be

sustained by prayer, by the Spirit of God, by faith that God's love is more powerful than any instrument of violence. Those who belong to the new order ushered in by Jesus Christ live in that faith, and thus break with the cycle of violence which is part of the old order. Thus, even as they suffer from the violence still in the world, they refuse to become party to that violence by responding to it with violence.

The community's commitment to feminism is also grounded in its commitment to the liberating work of God. Women in the Open Door Community share equally in decision-making, in the crucial daily roles of authority such as leading the soup kitchen, the Butler Street breakfast, the shower line, and worship. This same equality is affirmed in the language of the community. Inclusive language is used in worship. "References to women," a community resolution states, "should not belittle or exploit but rather build up and reflect reality. Women are women, not girls, or ladies, or sweethearts, or babies."

The Open Door understands the exclusion of women from full participation in all areas of life as oppressive and enslaving. Women have been denied the freedom "to enjoy the fullness of life that God promises us through Jesus Christ." Since Christ acts to bring reconciliation among all people and with God, the Open Door seeks with Christ the full inclusion of women in its community life. This involves rethinking male images of God and remaking assumed roles for women and men. This is not easy. The Open Door finds that in the struggle there are often misunderstandings:

Often women would like to be simply gentle and loving – to give a hug or to serve, as a mother might do. However, these actions are frequently misinterpreted: a hug can be seen as a come-on; sewing a button on a jacket can become a subservient act. Therefore women must be strong and wise: a firm handshake and a benevolent glance can communicate love and concern; teaching a man to sew a button on his jacket can produce equality.

In ways both large and small, the community endeavors to support the full equality of women in its life and public witness. Along with race and class the Open Door sees gender as the basis for exclusion and oppression in American society.

The Open Door, in all aspects of its commitment to liberation and to the creation of the beloved community, is sustained by its faith and prayer. The community, in its internal life and its public works, relies on faith in the biblical God. They seek to live this faith in their work with persons who are homeless and imprisoned. Faith in God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer leads to liberating action. God stands with the poor. The experience of the Open Door Community in trying to live consistently with these convictions is that such a life is at odds with much of American society. Ed Loring states this clearly in a reflection on Christmas printed in *Hospitality*:

The more deeply I probe the scriptures and the more clearly I understand the agenda of the American nation around such places as labor pools, blood banks, and Grady Hospital, the clearer it becomes that there is wide-spread repression of the Gospel in the United States.

But he turns to the Christmas story itself as giving testimony to where God is found and what this means for the Christian life:

Jesus' birth in a barn tells us much about who our God is, and how God acts in this world. Jesus' birth was a very political act pointing toward the agenda of God in the world and the ways in which God's people will live and serve and die. God is on the side of the poor and oppressed people, and in Jesus Christ, God joins in solidarity with the poor from the moment of birth. This is the message of the Christmas story.

The turning of this event into a binge of consumerism is only one of the more blatant corruptions of the Gospel in American life. To oppose consistently the powerful pull of such seductive cultural values, an alternative community structured around a different vision of life is needed. The Open Door, in its spirituality and ethics, seeks to be such a community by participating in the life of God's kingdom. Ed states:

What the Open Door has been most blessed to do is that it participates in the coming of the Kingdom. And the Kingdom comes and it flees. If you come over here and try to catch it...it would elude you. But it's here. I don't want to claim any more than a mustard seed. The Open Door is a mustard seed. And what is so wonderful about mustard seeds is that they are revolutionary.

Chapter Seven: Resistance and the Streets

On a warm June morning in 1990, eight people from “People for Urban Justice” entered the abandoned Imperial Hotel in downtown Atlanta. Murphy Davis, Elizabeth Dede, Sister Carol Schlicksup, C.M. Sherman, Larry Travick, Ed Loring, John Flournoy, and Sister Jo Ann Geary had all been involved with advocacy for the homeless in the city of Atlanta. Of these eight, seven were members of the Open Door Community. They were united in their outrage at the civic and business leaders of Atlanta who, in the previous two years, had exhibited continuing indifference to the suffering of the homeless.

The takeover of the Imperial Hotel was intended to be a dramatic statement of the need for affordable housing in Atlanta. Those who occupied the building pointed to the city’s actions over the past several years in which money that could have gone toward housing was instead earmarked for commercial development. Especially galling was the diversion of \$8 million dollars from the Federal government – intended for low-income housing and jobs – to help develop the Underground Atlanta entertainment and shopping area. But the protestors also pointed to the city’s wooing of the Super Bowl and the 1996 Summer Olympics as further evidence that money could be found for such high profile entertainment events, while little was offered to address the needs of the poor and homeless in the city.

The Imperial Hotel once had been a single resident occupancy hotel that provided low cost housing for the poor. Soon after its purchase by John Portman, a very influential and wealthy developer in Atlanta, the hotel was closed. Standing on the corner of Peachtree Street and Ralph McGill Boulevard in downtown Atlanta, the eight-story building, constructed in 1910, sat empty for ten years, slowly deteriorating from neglect. Those who entered the building saw it as an apt symbol for the city’s and the business community’s indifference to the shortage of housing in the city for the poor and homeless.

Shortly after occupying the building, the protestors unfurled a banner from the top floor of the hotel which said, “House the Homeless Here.” Through a megaphone, Ed Loring called out to people on the streets below to join in the protest, and to ask Mayor Maynard Jackson and the developer John Portman to join them in building housing for the homeless. On the sidewalks, other members of the Open Door and friends of the community picketed with signs asking how money could be found for Underground, the domed stadium, and the Olympics, while none was available for housing. In a letter sent to Portman the protestors stated that they had “re-opened the building to show you, and Joe Martin of Central Atlanta Progress and Mayor Jackson the way to provide single room occupancy housing.”

As morning passed into afternoon, word spread on the streets about the takeover of the hotel. Homeless men, women, and children soon appeared asking those inside if they could come in and stay. A welcome was extended and the hotel began to fill up with people in need of shelter. The protestors had assumed that the police would arrest them before noon. By early evening they and the almost seventy homeless people who had

joined them were still undisturbed. Portman, possibly fearing a public relations nightmare, had still not signed the necessary police complaint to have them removed.

As people moved in, they were asked to help clean up whatever room they would occupy. On Tuesday, a pile of debris began to appear on the sidewalk and street outside the hotel as homeless persons worked tirelessly to turn the building into a home. By Wednesday morning, the pile was large enough to block the city street in front of the hotel. City officials demanded that Portman Properties remove the debris since it came from the hotel they owned. At 11:00 a.m., the company gave in to city pressures and sent a bulldozer to clean up the streets. A large dumpster was then placed in the street to contain the debris being hauled out by the homeless renovators of the hotel.

Upon his return to town the day after the takeover, Mayor Jackson was met at the airport by representatives from Portman Properties. He went immediately to Portman's downtown headquarters and was briefed on the situation at the Imperial. He persuaded Portman not to evict the people from the hotel, and then went to the Imperial and urged the people there to be cooperative. He told them they would be allowed to stay until July 2. On Wednesday after a tour of the hotel, Jackson encouraged the squatters to leave, saying the building was unsafe and the city would open a shelter for them at Grady High School. Few from the hotel accepted the offer. One of them, Bill Jones, told the mayor, "We don't want your shelter. We want housing."

By this time, the Open Door had moved most of its daily operations to the Imperial. Members of the community were sleeping at the hotel; meals were being served; and a portable generator had been set up to provide light inside the building. Community members were also assisting in the organization of the homeless people who had taken up residence so that they could live peacefully and safely in the hotel. Leadership was emerging from within this homeless community. They were finding a power and voice which had long eluded them. They were not going to be easily budged from the hotel by promises from politicians or business leaders. Laura Cooper was one of these leaders. She explained their position in simple forceful language to a local newspaper: "This is our house. That's how we see it. We're just asking them [city leaders] to let us do this for ourselves. Is that wrong?"

While the occupation continued into its second week, Nelson Mandela came to Atlanta as part of his tour of the United States. Much as they wanted to hear Mandela speak at nearby Georgia Tech, the squatters refused to leave, fearing the city would not allow them back into the building. Meanwhile, negotiations continued between homeless leaders in the hotel, city officials, and representatives from Portman Properties. On July 2 an agreement was reached whereby the city promised to build 3,500 units of single room occupancy housing over the next three and half years, and also to open a shelter on Memorial Drive which the homeless themselves would control. Bill Jones, one of the leaders among the homeless, said the takeover had forced the city to take notice of homelessness, and that it had accomplished more in two weeks "than committees have done in seven years." Most of the homeless left the Imperial for Memorial Drive shelter after this agreement. Some returned to the streets.

Still, not all of the people who occupied the building were happy with the agreement. Some believed it had been reached only under the threat of arrest for criminal trespass. Further, it was not providing housing now, but only more shelter space. Finally, they still sought a meeting with John Portman to discuss the needs of the homeless and to urge him to provide resources to develop housing for the poor. For these reasons, six of the original protestors, refused to leave the hotel as demanded by Mayor Jackson and Portman Properties. On July 3 Ed Loring, Murphy Davis, Carol Schlicksup, Jo Ann Geary, Elizabeth Dede, and John Flournoy were removed from the hotel and arrested. The takeover had ended. The occupation of the Imperial Hotel, initiated by the Open Door Community, had taken on a life of its own. And when it ended, the community knew that they had been part of something they could never have anticipated or planned. The city and the business community had been startled into some action. Homeless persons had stood up to the powers with some success. A sense of their own strength in organizing themselves and confronting city and business leaders had taken root and grown. The plight of homeless persons in the city had received broad coverage in newspapers and on television. Many people had seen how eager homeless persons were to work to create a place they could call home.

The takeover of the Imperial is perhaps the most dramatic example of the Open Door Community's practice of prophetic politics. This type of politics follows the prophetic tradition in which symbolic acts dramatize realities in conflict with cultural values and thus call people to account. In these symbolic acts the community attempts to point to the societal injustice and suffering that people would prefer to forget or ignore. This political action is grounded in the community's faith. Carol Schlicksup justified her involvement in the takeover of the Imperial by saying:

I'm part of this action because I follow Jesus and Jesus is a God of the poor. I'm here to proclaim my rage at the city of Atlanta, her officials, her rich and the powerful citizens... I'm here to ask why some of us live in mansions and others live on the streets; to ask why we need so many entertainment centers and ostentatious office buildings rather than buildings to afford permanent shelter to all the citizens of this city... Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." Have we forgotten his example?

When members of the Open Door use such language to give reasons for their actions, they tap into a long tradition of prophetic and radical movements within Christianity. They recall Luke's Gospel in which Jesus opens his own ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

And Luke continues: "And he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing.'" Recalling Jesus and the prophets, the members of the Open Door see their actions with and for the oppressed as integral to their faith in God.

When the Open Door Community uses biblical words to call for justice for the poor, the homeless, and the imprisoned, it asserts the public power of such language. Religious convictions and biblical themes have often informed political life in the South. Biblical language and imagery have a particular resonance in the Bible Belt. Still, the power of the Bible has often been restricted to a moralism concerned only with private life. The Open Door's prophetic politics recalls the holistic thrust of the biblical call which speaks of the reign of God in all areas of life.

In reflecting upon their own existence as a community, and their work, members of the Open Door have seen political implications in their daily tasks. But they quickly acknowledge that there is still a need to act more explicitly for social change. A community handbook states:

The soup kitchen is also a sign of the degradation, violence and injustice with which this nation is filled. Hunger is a political manifestation of an economic system which serves the rich and starves the poor. We must never be satisfied with feeding the hungry Christ. Our compassion for the poor must be channeled into analysis and action that struggles to change the political and economic systems which are the root of hunger in America.

Out of the community's faith commitment to Christ, enacted in their life with the poor, comes the motivation for political involvement. This is yet another manifestation of the wholeness of the community's faith which places all of life under God and so refuses to separate charity from justice, faith from social action. Public protest and advocacy on behalf of the homeless and imprisoned is necessary if the community is to be faithful. Murphy writes:

Our little crumbs of service are not enough. What the poor and downtrodden need is not our piecemeal charity but justice. Not that we will close the soup kitchen or shower line or shelters. Not that we will stop visiting in the prisons and jails or stop writing letters. But this is not an answer. An answer would only come in the form of justice. Wholeness. Enough for all God's children. ... We must find the way to embody/incarnate the misery of the poor in the public arena.

The political action of the community thus does not aim toward compromise and the balancing of interests. Instead, it seeks to raise fundamental moral issues that are so often denied a hearing in political decision making. Here I will focus on the community's prophetic politics in addressing homelessness in Atlanta. In the next chapter I will detail the community's involvement with political action on behalf of the imprisoned and those threatened by the death penalty.

It was in late 1979 and early 1980 that the numbers of homeless persons in Atlanta reached a level where government and business leaders began to consider it a public problem. A series of articles on the homeless in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* raised the issue of street people harassing shoppers and business people in the downtown area. These articles reveal much about the public attitude of that time toward the

homeless. One headline read: "City Officials Move to Clear Derelicts From Atlanta Parks." The article which followed stated:

In an effort to clear Central City Park and other municipal parks of drunks and litter Atlanta city officials are assigning cleanup crews to the affected areas... The move will allow police officers to arrest drunks and derelicts who have been sleeping in the parks, officials said. Besides leaving litter in the parks, the drunks have been smothering the grass. (Atlanta Constitution, August 15, 1979)

Shortly thereafter, another article reported that park sprinklers are turned on after 11:00 p.m. until 1:00 a.m. "to make the ground too wet for sleeping." In a January 22, 1980 letter to the editor, Ed responded to these articles and the actions by the city:

These men, excluded by our social system, broken by their personal histories, and pushed from nowhere to nowhere by people who wish not to be bothered, are again the recipients of verbal abuse and planned harassment by the newspapers and the business establishment.

Dan Sweat, the president of Central Atlanta Progress, an association of downtown business leaders, responded to Ed's letter. Calling Ed's approach "myopic and simplistic," Sweat contended the problem of homelessness would:

...require a lot more from our religious institutions than a placebo theology which equates "love thy neighbor" with an occasional hot meal, a crash pad, two verses of "the Old Rugged Cross" and 25 cents for a one way MARTA ride back downtown.

This verbal skirmish which took place shortly after the Open Door Community settled in at 910 Ponce de Leon, was part of the initial stages of the Open Door's continuing struggle with the downtown business community and Atlanta city government concerning the homeless. It was this struggle which was taken up again in the takeover of the Imperial Hotel.

The lines of this conflict remain clearly drawn. Emerging in the 1980's as one of the South's premier cities, Atlanta is a place of paradox. It possesses both one of the highest levels of poverty in the nation along and a prosperous corporate economy. The poverty is most pronounced among African-Americans in the city, while the wealth is largely in the hands of a mostly white business class. The city government, although dominated by African-Americans, remains on most issues subservient to the white business interests. There is always the fear that white business leaders will pull their corporations from the central city and relocate in the suburbs. Thus there is a great deal of sensitivity surrounding the downtown area and its image. Much of this sensitivity is related to the large number of homeless people, many of whom are African-American, who congregate each day in Woodruff Park at the heart of downtown. They are regarded as threatening by many of the whites who come to work in downtown offices.

A February 10, 1980 article in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution Magazine* described the situation from the viewpoint of the business interests. The article traced the geographical

outline of “skid row.” Skid row begins at the two interstate bus stations on International Boulevard. It then continues up International across Peachtree to Interstate 75 where it turns south to Decatur Street before going back to Spring Street and back down to the bus depots:

It is almost a perfect rectangle, touching or encompassing the hotel, business, and shopping areas of downtown. With the Atlanta Union Mission on Ellis, the city jail on Decatur, Grady Hospital at the foot of Coca-Cola Place by the interstate, Central City Park in the middle of the rectangle, and a number of cheap hotels, liquor stores, commercial blood banks, and day-labor offices in between, it encompasses everything a derelict needs for survival in metropolitan Atlanta... Every city has a derelict problem. In most places, skid row is on the edge of the central business district. But in Atlanta skid row is the central business district.

What this article did not explain was the systematic implementation since 1950 of the Central Atlanta Plan by city and business interests. This plan seeks to protect downtown property values through slum clearance, an expansion of the Central Business District, and improved mobility to and from the central city through highway and rail construction. This same construction removes poor and primarily African-American housing from the center of the city. Further, urban renewal land is not to be used for any more public housing, nor is new public housing to be located in the central city area. The proposals to eliminate the homeless from the downtown area simply continue the Central Atlanta Plan and its myth that “whatever benefits the central business district benefits everyone.” In their political actions, the Open Door Community and others involved with the poor and homeless in Atlanta seek to confront this myth and its embodiment in city and business policies.

The manner in which the Open Door fights this myth through political action has varied greatly over the years. Issues have come and gone which have represented the underlying struggle between those seeking to build an Atlanta which excludes the poor and those seeking to build what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the beloved community” in which there is racial harmony and economic justice. Here just a few of these struggles are detailed.

In 1983 the battle over homeless people in downtown Atlanta focused amazingly on the issue of whether there should be public restrooms in the city of Atlanta. Homeless persons were constantly arrested on charges of public urination, while the city refused to provide public restrooms. In a public hearing on the issue at City Hall on October 12, 1983, Rob Johnson from the Open Door asked the city to halt arrests for public urination until public restrooms were provided. He cited figures indicating that over one hundred arrests were made each month on these charges. Since homeless persons could not pay the fines they ended up serving time at the city’s work farm. Such arrests merely served the purpose of harassing people who had no other choice but public urination. At the same public hearing, Dan Sweat of Central Atlanta Progress expressed his worry that if the city had public toilets, homeless people from around the nation would flock to Atlanta. He further suggested that the lack of toilets for the homeless was not an insult to

their human dignity since by being on the streets homeless persons indicated their own lack of self-respect.

The Open Door Community and others demonstrated and leafleted at City Hall in support of public toilets. At the same time, they began to pressure the city to open shelters for the homeless. On December 1, 1983 the Open Door held an all night vigil on the steps of City Hall. The city council met the next day and approved the installation of a portable toilet at Plaza Park downtown. Plaza Park was a narrow strip of green near the Five Points Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) station where homeless persons were generally left alone by police. The council also approved the opening of one emergency shelter for the homeless. A partial victory had been won, but the Open Door Community clearly saw how inadequate the response of the city continued to be in terms of the needs of the homeless. Ed Loring told the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*: "The vote represents an unwillingness by this administration to face poverty in our downtown." On April 1, 1984 the community held another vigil at City Hall to protest the closing of the city's shelter for the summer.

In June 1984, the community began to picket the city's labor center to protest the slowness of renovations to the center so that it would have toilets and showers. On June 8, the community demonstrated at City Hall. Ed carried a toilet into the lobby of the building and sat on it reading the scriptures. He vowed that he would refuse to move until a contract was signed for the renovation of the labor center. He and several others with him were arrested for disorderly conduct. Their point, however, had been made. Ed's arrest came at noon and by 2 p.m. that afternoon a contract had been signed for the renovation. The construction at the labor center began June 18.

The community was again the focus of public controversy in 1985. This time however, the issue directly threatened the community's existence. An article in the *Atlanta Constitution* on October 31 described efforts in the city to serve the growing homeless population. These efforts, according to the newspaper, were increasing tensions in areas of the city where the numbers of homeless were especially visible. Included in the article was the reaction of Marcus Davis, a lawyer whose firm occupied the building next to the Open Door. He stated:

Everyday they [the Open Door] serve two meals, and you'll have 50 disheveled-looking people lying around in the yard. At times it looks like a scene from Dante's Inferno. It's just unsightly.

Davis wanted the Open Door to move its shower and soup kitchen lines from the front to the back door of its building. The Open Door refused on the grounds that to do so would further stigmatize the homeless as social outcasts and remove them from public awareness.

The dispute worsened in early 1986 when the Open Door received a series of threatening letters from Davis and another partner in the law firm, William Gignilliat. One letter warned, "If you continue with your intransigence...the business and neighborhood groups will ultimately abolish your facility and/or extinguish its sources of revenue."

Another letter revealed the economic and social fears that lay behind the law firm's opposition to the Open Door's location:

Many people in this area, business and residents, view the Open Door as an eyesore and a hindrance to the revitalization of the Ponce de Leon corridor and Downtown Atlanta. Many feel that downtown Atlanta may die on the vine because of flight to the suburbs by residents and business alike. Your facility is believed to exacerbate the problem.

By this time, the neighborhood around the Open Door was involved in a process of gentrification. The nearby Virginia-Highlands area had seen an influx of young professionals who were renovating older homes. On Ponce de Leon, old structures were being renovated or torn down and new businesses were quickly being built. An abandoned Ford plant became an upscale shopping center and apartment complex. The law firm next to the Open Door had turned an old crumbling mansion into a distinguished looking office building. The neighborhood was changing even as it remained "home" for many homeless.

The Open Door publicly refused to move to the back door, the homeless waiting for soup or showers. Privately the community wondered if they might have to find a new location for themselves. A compromise was finally worked out through the mediation of the Atlanta Presbytery. A fence and shrubbery would separate the property of the Open Door from that of the law firm. The community would make special efforts to keep the area around the house free from litter. No move, either of the lines, or of the community, would be necessary.

This struggle with the law firm prefigured on a small scale the political battles the Open Door fought in the late 1980's. Government and business leaders continually tried to keep the homeless out of public sight and to deny any connection between government and business actions and the existence of homelessness in Atlanta. The Open Door, on the other hand, saw the attempts to remove the homeless from public awareness as part of a larger pattern of denying the human dignity of the homeless. As long as the homeless could be viewed as a threat to the community, or as somehow less than human, it would be possible to deny any common obligations to them as members of the human community.

Both city and business officials, with occasional help from the media, promoted the image of the homeless as either threats to the good order of the community or as society's losers who basically deserved life on the streets. Supporting the position of city government and business was the Central Area Study commissioned by the city of Atlanta, Fulton County, and Central Atlanta Progress. This study, reflecting the Central Atlanta Plan first proposed in the 1950's, analyzed downtown problems and suggested ways to revitalize downtown in order to withstand suburban competition. It stated that public safety was a major concern in the downtown area, and that such safety was a matter of both perception and reality. The study found the presence of homeless persons in downtown a threat to public safety on both counts:

Perceived safety is very poor, primarily due to the proliferation of street people, and homeless on the streets and in the parks. Public facilities such as the library are gathering places for these people. ... Many people fear the homeless who sleep in public areas, panhandle, and sometimes have alcohol or drug problems or are mentally unstable. (Central Area Study II, 1987:17)

The study then suggested the creation of a “vagrant free zone” in which homeless persons would be subject to harassment and arrest. The now familiar theme of white business interests exerting pressure on African-American controlled city hall to push the poor out of the central area of the city was evident once again.

These business interests had a strong ally in the mayor of the city, Andrew Young. Not surprisingly, this Central Area Study was commissioned in connection with the development of Underground Atlanta, a \$142 million dollar project aimed at revitalizing a shopping and entertainment core of the city. The project itself would conveniently eliminate Plaza Park and thus remove one place of refuge for the homeless. Additionally, the success of Underground Atlanta, once it opened, was tied by Mayor Young and business leaders to the elimination of homeless people in the downtown. The homeless must go since they might frighten away conventioners and suburban shoppers. The development of Underground Atlanta had been a priority of Mayor Young since his election in 1982. Its financing was an intricate web of city and federal monies and private investment. After many legal challenges, construction began in 1987.

The Open Door Community responded to the development of Underground Atlanta and what it represented for the homeless by mounting a long campaign that had essentially two goals. First, the Open Door wanted the city to replace Plaza Park with another park where homeless persons would not be hassled. The community suggested that the park be named in honor of Al B. Smith, a homeless man who had been killed at a shelter. Second, the community wanted to keep people aware of the situation of the homeless and how money spent on Underground Atlanta should have gone to housing. In fact, the project involved \$8 million from Community Development Block Grant funds intended for housing and jobs for the poor. Another \$12 million came from a city sales tax which the Open Door saw as money that should have been used to address the needs of the city’s poor.

In addition to numerous meetings with city officials concerning the Al Smith Park, the community began weekly picketing and leafleting in Woodruff Park. In April 1987, Open Door Community members tied crosses to the construction fence surrounding Plaza Park. Each cross represented a person who had died on the streets of Atlanta from exposure and neglect. One day a week throughout the summer of 1987, the community marched from Woodruff Park, down Peachtree past the Underground Atlanta construction site, to the steps of City Hall. Along the way, community members sang, beat old soup pots, and leafleted. They hoped to keep alive the issue of how the plans for a revitalized downtown were based on the exclusion of the poor and homeless.

The reception of the community’s actions by downtown shoppers and business people eating lunch in Woodruff Park was often hostile. The community’s actions and their

leaflets represented a view of Atlanta from the underside where those who had lost in the competitive marketplace languished. No one wanted to be reminded of their own precarious position in an economy based on self-interest and competition. In the Reagan era many of the safety nets had been taken down, and the few that remained might not be enough to cushion one's fall. To suggest a common responsibility for each other, as the Open Door was doing, seemed a threat to one's own shrinking slice of the economic pie. Further, the Open Door's persistence in raising questions about an economic system which pitted people against each other appeared too radical for those who had experienced some benefit from the system as it now stood. Handing a leaflet to a person or marching with signs proclaiming "Downtown is for everyone" often elicited angry responses of "get a job" or "the homeless need to take care of themselves."

By the time Underground Atlanta opened on June 15, 1989, little had changed in the city with regard to the homeless. Talks concerning the replacement of Plaza Park had gone on for almost two years with little sign of progress. Labor pools continued their exploitative practices. City shelters remained few in number and the goal of providing permanent housing for Atlanta's poor and homeless received no serious attention. Lines at soup kitchens were as long as ever. As Underground Atlanta opened, it was not surprising that two protests disrupted the festivities. The first protest was not planned by the community. Rather it seemed an act of God. A massive rain and wind storm forced the cancellation of outdoor activities, and opening ceremonies were hurriedly moved indoors and shortened.

The Open Door Community led a second protest which was joined by supporters from Atlanta Advocates for the Homeless, Jubilee Partners, and the Koinonia Community. Picketing and leafleting took place at the entrances to Underground to remind people heading into the shopping and entertainment complex: "In this same year that Atlanta has spent \$142 million to develop Underground as entertainment for the well-to-do, 40,000 men, women, and children have slept in shelters for the homeless. LET'S GET OUR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT!!!!!!!" The reverse side of the leaflet noted that the financing for the development of Underground had been taken from government funds intended for housing and jobs for the poor. The leaflet concluded, "We see nothing inherently wrong with the development of entertainment facilities. But when the overwhelming resources of the city go into entertainment while the suffering of the poor is largely ignored or dismissed, we are building a broken community." Inside of Underground Atlanta when Andrew Young began his speech to laud its opening, six protesters (Ed Loring, Elizabeth Dede, Ty Brown, Tim Wyse, and Pete Stinner from the Open Door, and Steve Clemens from Koinonia) sounded air horns and chanted "Atlanta keeps the homeless underground." They were quickly arrested. Mayor Young, visibly upset by the protest, nervously claimed that Atlanta was committed to addressing the needs of the homeless.

His actions as mayor, however, belied his words. Mayor Young's attitude was that the city had little responsibility for the homeless. It was a problem best left with Atlanta's churches. He thought that the most the city government could do was to encourage investment which would supposedly lead to jobs. Underground Atlanta represented for him the best possible response to homelessness since it combined white business interests with African-American political power. It would provide both jobs and a vibrant downtown gathering place. In the same spirit, he worked toward the end of his term to

promote the selection of Atlanta for the 1996 Olympic Games, promising the city an economic windfall from the selection. In neither instance did Mayor Young seek to insure that the economic benefits of Underground Atlanta, or the Olympic Games, would in fact reach the poor of the city, or that the monies would be used to develop low-income housing. In fact, the Olympic Village housing is currently slated to be turned over to Georgia State University for student dormitories after the Games.

In fall 1989, Maynard Jackson returned as mayor of Atlanta, having served a previous term. The Open Door Community hoped this change in city administration would lead to more concern for the homeless and poor in Atlanta. At this point, it is not clear whether this will be the case. Shortly after his election, Mayor Jackson visited with members of the Open Door Community and homeless folks at the Butler Street breakfast. His concern for the homeless and his learning of labor pool abuses from the homeless men he talked with seemed cause for some optimism. Yet, in the spring of 1990, a new wave of police harassment and arrests of homeless persons took place. Members of the Open Door Community, out on the streets for their annual Holy Week with the Homeless, were told by a policeman they could not sleep on the steps of the Fulton County Health Department across the street from Grady Hospital. His reason: "Lots of big people drive along this street, and they don't want to see you. You've got to get up and move on." The vagrant free zone had apparently been put into effect. Homeless advocates, including the Open Door, wondered if the city administration was continuing to accept the myth: "Whatever benefits the central business district benefits everyone."

In prophetic actions such as the takeover of the Imperial Hotel in early June 1990, the Open Door continued to challenge this myth. The mixed results of the community's actions to date point to the ongoing power this myth has for those who run the institutions of government and business in the city of Atlanta. But these results also give witness to the tenacity of the Open Door Community and its faith that God is opposed to the injustice and exploitation found in this city. In its resistance on the streets of Atlanta, the community continues to offer an alternative vision, the vision of the Beloved Community, in which all fully participate with human dignity in forming a good life together.

Chapter Eight: Resisting Death

A cemetery may seem a strange place to begin talking about the Open Door Community's resistance to death. Yet, for those who are disciples of a person executed by the state and buried in a borrowed grave, it is perhaps not so strange. The Roman Empire expressed its hopes for enduring power by putting an end to the life of Jesus. But that state has long since passed on while the message "Jesus lives" is still preached and lived. The resurrection of Jesus is at the core of the Open Door Community's resistance to death. Death is a manifestation of sin in which our relationships with God and with other persons are broken. The Open Door sees the results of sin in both the meanness of the streets and the court mandated executions of death row prisoners. The resurrection is God's confirmation of Jesus' message of the Kingdom, of liberation from sin in all its death dealing forms. Members of the Open Door, in their resistance to death on the streets and in prisons, seek to join with Jesus in the God-inspired struggle for life against sin and death.

On the land of Jubilee Partners, an intentional Christian community located near Athens, Georgia, a cemetery has been created on a knoll surrounded by pines. Here some members of the Open Door Community who came from the streets with bodies worn and tired have eventually found rest. Some of the community's friends from death row, executed by the State, are also buried at Jubilee. In the deaths of their homeless friends, the community sees the results of society's neglect of the marginalized. In the executions of their friends on death row the community sees the results of state-sanctioned violence that expresses society's desire for vengeance; and they know that such vengeance falls more easily on those who are poor and African-American.

The rural location of Jubilee Partners is quite removed from the noise and traffic of Ponce de Leon Avenue in Atlanta. But the Open Door and Jubilee communities are united in their hope of the resurrection and their resistance to death. Out in the Georgia countryside, the Jubilee community works with refugees, primarily from Central America. These refugees face death in their own countries from soldiers and death squads trained and armed with U.S. support. From the first day of its soup kitchen, when Don Mosely cooked biscuits and Vietnamese refugees helped serve Atlanta's homeless, to its demonstrations at the opening of Underground Atlanta, the Open Door Community has received spiritual and material support from the Jubilee community. Both stand together in what they see as central to the Gospel: new life through the liberation of Jesus Christ.

The Open Door's history is replete with public actions which resist death by raising critical questions about the injustices suffered by the homeless in Atlanta. We have previously seen how these actions involve the community in controversy. Some who support the soup kitchen or other works of the community would prefer that soup be served without social critiques, that charity be given without attention to injustice. Still, those who make such criticisms usually share the Open Door's conviction that something is wrong when people have no food or shelter and die on the streets from disease and exposure. The Open Door's resistance to the death penalty, however, causes a sharper polarization. It commonly happens that when one issue of *Hospitality* expresses the community's opposition to the death penalty, the next issue will carry letters from

persons who say this opposition means they can no longer support the community's work with the homeless.

Often these letters ask why the community finds it even necessary to be involved with prison ministry and opposition to the death penalty. Isn't there plenty of work to do in terms of homelessness without adding this prison work? However, this question confuses the history of the community. Chronologically, the prison work came first. We can recall here that Ed Loring and Murphy Davis were actively engaged in opposition to the death penalty while still at Clifton Presbyterian Church. Murphy Davis was deeply involved in organizing a national demonstration against the death penalty, held in Atlanta in May 1977. The night shelter did not open at Clifton until 1979.

Murphy's prison ministry grew out of her opposition to the death penalty. Shortly after the national demonstration in 1977 she began organizing transportation for prison visits by the relatives of prisoners. With the state prison at Reidsville some five hours from Atlanta, those without reliable cars or no cars at all would rarely have been able to make the trip. The Open

Door Community continued this ministry after moving to 910.

Eventually, these trips became regular monthly excursions, and this continued when the Hardwick state prison opened in Milledgeville. The vans and volunteer drivers organized by the Open Door continue to make it possible for families to nourish the important personal relations between themselves and their loved ones in prison. The reality of God's Kingdom in which life and love are shared is evident in these visits. One mother wrote the Open Door:

The trip to Hardwick means a great deal to me, for it is a time of fellowship with our loved ones – a time to show them that through it all we care, we're concerned, and we love them.

The Milledgeville trips were for several years organized by Joanne Solomon whose work with the Open Door Community was both varied and valuable. John Mills from the Emory Catholic Community has also played an important role in rounding up volunteers to drive. Like so much of the community's work, it is made possible on a regular basis by friends and volunteers who make up the extended Open Door Community. Vans are often donated for the day by area churches such as Butler Street C.M.E. and Central Presbyterian.

Not long after these trips began, the Milledgeville Presbyterian Church offered to serve lunch for those going to visit prisoners. The lunch offered a satisfying meal and the opportunity to relax before going on to the visit at the prison. Over the years, enduring friendships have formed between the church folks from Milledgeville and the prisoners' relatives and friends who come from inner city Atlanta for the visit. Joanne Solomon reflected on the signs of the Kingdom in the life-giving ties formed in this prison ministry. When those on the Hardwick trip gather before lunch to sing "Amazing Grace," God's liberating love is evident:

As we joined hand to hand in a wide circle, I couldn't help but think of the bonds this circle represented: bonds not only between friends new and old, but within these families as well; sources of strength and encouragement in difficult circumstances.

I thought of these families who would enter the prison buildings, allowed only the required picture identification, and no gifts for their loved ones but themselves. I was reminded of God's gift to people everywhere and in all circumstances of life. The gift of Jesus who gave freely of himself so that we might all know...healing and restoration to the broken places in our lives.

But this Kingdom vision is not blind or myopic. It recognizes the suffering and the death, the despair, and the destruction that prison represents. Out of the relationships formed in their prison ministry, members of the Open Door have come to recognize important connections between the prisons and the streets. Visiting with prisoners and their families, community members learn first hand of the relations between poverty, prison, and the death penalty. Common threads weave together homelessness and prison, threads of poverty, race, and a society wrapped in fearful economic competition. The perspective of community members allows them to see that those selected for execution are distinguished more by their poverty, and/or mental deficiencies, than by their criminal records or the circumstances of their crimes. Community members also learn something of prison life and the degradation and dehumanization incarceration fosters. These contacts with the unjust realities of the criminal justice system ground the community's opposition to the death penalty and to laws which appear directed at penalizing persons for being poor or homeless. It is the experience of the community that both the streets and the prisons are populated by people who have been relegated to the margins. In both places society manifests its choice that there are some people who are disposable, not worth the effort and the resources to save.

Because the Open Door lives in solidarity with the poor, it often experiences these connections between the streets and prisons in dramatic fashion. Resistance to death on the streets and resistance to death in prison are not separable. Homeless persons frequently disappear for several weeks and then reappear to tell of their arrest and imprisonment. When the Democratic National Convention came to Atlanta in the summer of 1988, numerous homeless persons ended up behind bars. The charges were typically related to their being homeless: criminal trespass for sleeping in an abandoned building, or public urination because there are no public facilities in Atlanta. One of the places community members visit during their times on the street is Atlanta's municipal court. Many of the "criminals" on the docket are homeless persons who violated one of the many city laws aimed at keeping them from disturbing the peace of those who come downtown to work or play. This peace is disturbed by the very presence of homeless persons on a sidewalk or in a city park.

The repeated efforts of city and business leaders to put into place a "vagrant free zone" in downtown Atlanta constantly remind the community that being homeless is considered nearly a crime in itself.

Perhaps the most forceful connection between the streets and prisons came when a community member from the streets told Murphy that the prisoner on death row she was talking about was his son. Charlie Young, Sr. had come to the community when his age made him physically incapable of continuing to do the hard labor by which he had supported himself throughout his life. Charlie Young, Jr. had come to know Murphy and Ed through their visits to death row. The father had come to know the slow execution which is life on the streets; the son faced the more efficient execution by the state. Their relationship as father and son made even more poignant the link between the homeless who know poverty and racial discrimination and prisoners on death row who are typically poor and African-American.

Murphy describes another example of the ties between poverty, racism, and prison in the continuation of what she calls “prison slavery.” She reminds people that the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution did not abolish slavery; it simply narrowed its practice to punishment for crime. Thus she is able to trace the use of prison labor in the South after the Civil War as an enslaved work force. Plantations and private companies “leased” prisoners from the state, putting them to work for long hours at hard labor with no remuneration. This private leasing was abolished in the early 1900’s because of numerous abuses, but inmates continue to be used today for public works. Such work rarely builds skills that could be useful after prison. In Georgia, the prisoners are not paid for this work. The result is that able-bodied workers remain in prison and are prevented from caring for their families. Murphy tells the story of her first encounter with prison slavery when she visited the Georgia State Prison at Reidsville in the spring of 1978. When she drove onto the prison grounds “as far as one could see there were groups of men, mostly black, bent over, laboring in the fields. Here and there were uniformed men on horseback with rifles across their laps, overseeing the work.”

This system of prison slavery finds few critics. The *Atlanta Journal* thus could run the headline “Early Releases Steal Inmates From Work Crews” and matter-of-factly report that prison overcrowding had forced the early release of inmates, “cutting into the labor pool Fulton and Gwinnett counties tap for road maintenance and trash collection.” The only complaints were from “homeowners on curbside pick-up routes” who were disturbed by “delays in collection of yard waste.” That slave labor was being used to pick up their garbage did not appear to bother any of them.

In these experiences that reveal the injustice and death inherent in prison systems in the United States, the Open Door Community seeks to announce the Kingdom in which God liberates persons and brings them life. Much of this effort to proclaim the Kingdom requires pointing to facts about the prison system and the death penalty that require repentance. One such fact that is central from the Open Door Community’s perspective is that this prison system is seriously flawed by racism and provides an outlet for social frustrations caused by an economic-political system grounded in competition and class conflict. After the execution of John Eldon Smith, Murphy observed how these facts worked together to result in his death:

...it seems that we as a people have spent literally millions of dollars to try, condemn, cage, and kill one human being. In the process, the careers of various

politicians, lawyers, judges, law enforcement and prison officials have been enhanced. ...And the attempt has been great to assure the public that something has been done about crime. The law works you see.

One more human being is dead in Georgia, the execution capital of the United States. Others will follow. They will be poor and they will be selected according to our patterns of racial discrimination. Beyond that "method" [of selection] they will be a randomly selected few who will be offered up to pacify the public rage and frustration over the way things are.

As Murphy's statement indicates, the Open Door Community sees the death penalty as one way in which society vents its disappointments and fears in the face of economic struggle and insecurity. Community members often point to the fact that public support for the death penalty waxes during economic hard times and wanes in times of economic prosperity. In 1935 at the height of the Depression, 199 people were executed in the United States. In 1944, 124 were executed. The numbers continued to decline as the economy improved so that in 1967 there were only two executions. With the economic anxieties of the late 1970's and 1980's, the number of executions began to rise again. The community argues that public demand for the death penalty increases as society seems more threatened by economic and social ills. Murphy observes that people find it is easier to focus on "bad people" and to execute them, rather than to attend to economic and social causes for crime. People feel that "if we'd just get rid of those bastards, we'd all be safer; we'd all be better off." Society needs persons to blame for its shortcomings, and the easiest targets are the poor and racial minorities who have few resources by which to defend themselves.

Beyond these economic and racial facts concerning the death penalty, the community also points to the desire for vengeance that fuels much of the public support for executions. Death row prisoners are considered beyond human and social concern because of their actions. Their heinous crimes "prove" their inhumanity. They are incapable of human feeling or they would not have committed their crimes. Since they are not considered human, they have no right to life. This desire for vengeance was expressed with an unsurpassed bluntness by an editorial in a Georgia newspaper after an execution:

It is with pleasure this week that we bid a hearty "good riddance" to Henry Willis III who was electrocuted at the Georgia Diagnostic Center near here last week. Willis, who killed Ray City police chief Ed Giddens as he pleaded for his life, lived on death row at taxpayer expense for far, far too long.

Criminals like Henry Willis III, the others executed before him, and those currently under death sentence are human waste. Executing them should come as easily to a civilized society as flushing the toilet.

In a society where such convictions are stated publicly, by not only newspaper editors but also politicians and prosecutors, the Open Door realizes that its message about the liberating love given in the Kingdom of God will be hard to hear. Murphy writes:

When the moral tone is set by political opportunists, the language of love and reconciliation sounds silly. It is “always” easier and more popular to have a quick fix and settle for revenge and fear. But this does not help us become more compassionate and helpful to the wounded ones.

For the Open Door then, what is finally most disturbing about the economic and racial facts concerning the death penalty and its reality as institutionalized vengeance, is that the courts are being asked to do something they rightly cannot do. Courts composed of fallible human beings cannot judge with any certainty which offenders are so beyond redemption that they should be eliminated from the human community. The death penalty is wrong finally because it denies the possibility of conversion, of reconciliation, of new life. Instead, it perpetuates a cycle of violence in the world. Murphy writes:

Jesus always held out the possibility that any human can change. Turning away from sin is always a possibility, and it is not for human beings to say that the possibility no longer exists.

Violence always produces grief and brokenness. Capital punishment produces more grief and brokenness. It does not help the victims who have already suffered grief and brokenness, nor does it lead anyone toward healing and restoration. It only heaps brokenness upon brokenness, grief upon grief, murder upon murder.

Members of the Open Door Community, in visiting and exchanging letters with prisoners on death row, have found that even persons who have committed the vilest of crimes, and who in justice belong behind bars, are still human, have wisdom to offer, and can share love and tenderness. Murphy often tells the story of Jerome Bowden, a mentally retarded African-American, executed by the state of Georgia. Before his death, Jerome offered his simple philosophy of human life. He said, “Peoples was not made to dog around, peoples was made to be respected.” Murphy and Ed also recall that when Hannah was still a baby, they brought her along on a visit to death row. The inmates carefully cradled her and cooed with the unabashed joy of proud relatives. The media portrayals of blood thirsty criminals devoid of humanity were obviously incorrect. The mystery of each person and the possibilities for love are not the realities presented by media stereotypes of those who are sent to death row.

The Open Door Community, in its Kingdom-inspired resistance to death, has consistently engaged in public actions to dramatize their convictions and to recall for others what they have learned in their relationships with death row inmates and other prisoners. Before every execution, community members participate in a silent vigil held on the steps of the state capitol. There they are joined by members of the Jubilee community and others who oppose the death penalty. The banners held are direct and simple: “Stop the Death Penalty,” “Respect Life,” and “End Executions.” This simple protest often enrages persons who drive by on their commute home or on their way to a Braves baseball game. Seeing the faces of persons on their way to enjoy “America’s Pastime” so contorted by anger at the presence of peaceful protestors makes one wonder what deep insecurities and anxieties are symbolized in the death penalty. The obscenities, gestures, and objects directed at the vigil participants seem to express a hatred and fear that can be satisfied

only by the death of another human being. And the State, too, seems afraid to see these protesters question its business of death. Across the street, men in conservative suits and wingtip shoes observe the protest and take pictures of the participants.

The Open Door Community also resists death when it offers a funeral for a man executed by the state. Joe Mulligan was executed by the state of Georgia in May 1987. Following his request, his relatives, friends, and members of the Open Door gathered with the Jubilee community at Jubilee's Koinonia House. From the hall the coffin was carried under the hot Georgia sun about a half mile along a dirt road to the cemetery. As persons grew tired, others in the funeral procession stepped forward to share in the pallbearers' task. Those who carried the casket saw their drops of sweat fall upon it like tears and these were joined by those who wept more visibly.

Upon reaching the gravesite, the coffin was placed on two-by-fours that straddled the grave hewn out of red Georgia clay. Murphy read from Psalm 23 and then everyone joined in song:

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.
Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain.
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.
If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell of the love of Jesus, and say "He died for all."*

After several readings from the Bible, those gathered were invited to share their memories of Joe Mulligan. A woman spoke of his love for the open spaces of the beach and the ocean. She joyfully proclaimed that now, after so many years in prison, he was free to enjoy the beach of heaven. A man read from one of Joe Mulligan's favorite passages in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Strength to Love*:

*To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you.
...Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win **you** in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."*

Joe, the man said, applied this passage to his situation on death row hoping that if he could not be freed, his suffering and death would eventually lead people to free others from death sentences. In this way Joe Mulligan fought his own feelings of despair and bitterness while on death row.

As the service closed, members of the Open Door and Jubilee communities stepped forward and using ropes, slowly lowered the coffin into the grave. Each person who

wished to do so took turns with the shovels, lifting the red clay into the tomb. When this task was finished, Joseph Mulligan's mother laid a wreath on the grave and then tearfully stepped away.

The walk back to Koinonia House for dinner was quiet but not despondent. More stories of the life of Joe Mulligan were shared, and the portrait was drawn of a man who could not be simply dismissed as a murderer. The funeral, away from the glare of media and the words of prosecutors and politicians about the necessity of the death penalty for mad killers, simply stated that Joseph Mulligan, too, was a human being, flawed but loved. The state could, and did, end his life, but it could not restrict his life to its judgment and execution. The state had proclaimed Joseph Mulligan beyond redemption. The stories, prayers, and songs of those gathered under the pines at Jubilee refuted the State's judgment and proclaimed his life as redeemed. In this alternative space, the human dignity of the person who had been killed was affirmed.

In the experience of this funeral, in letters and visits with prisoners, and in protest, the community finds itself renewed in its God-inspired struggle for life. Members of the community find that a deep hope emerges out of the suffering and terrible discouragement that comes with each execution. This hope emerges when they gather in prayer and bring their experiences into the context of God's Word. In such times, there is renewal in the belief that their struggle is God's struggle. As is often the case, Matthew 25 serves as the primary scriptural referent. In feeding the hungry and visiting the prisoner, members of the community come into the presence of God. God's presence, the Kingdom of God, brings fullness of life. God opposes the variety of ways in which death deforms and destroys human existence. In Matthew 25, it is evident that to join in this life means resisting death through acts on behalf of the poor and the imprisoned. And these acts include not only offering soup or coming for a visit, but also working to bring justice. Murphy states:

It doesn't make sense to serve food or to visit people in prison and come to know them and pray for them and then not cry out on their behalf when their human dignity and their very lives are threatened. We are not called to serve without also being called to raise Cain about the humanity and dignity being denied these folks.

It is in the raising of this Cain that the community seeks to resist death and join in the liberating life of Jesus Christ.

Chapter Nine: Looking Back and Looking Forward

For just over ten years, the Open Door Community has been at 910 Ponce de Leon. Looking back over this past decade, some would say that much has changed in the city of Atlanta. Downtown has begun to show some signs of revitalization with the opening of Underground Atlanta, the construction of a domed stadium, the development of several other large commercial ventures, and an increased police presence. The business community has not fled the central city area even as suburban locations have attracted numerous tenants to newly developed office parks.

In the fall of 1990 the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* proudly reported that the city was one of the top five large cities in the world in terms of quality of life. This followed the August announcement by the International Olympic Committee that Atlanta would host the 1996 Summer Games. The pride of the city over these developments seems far removed from the public doubt and anxiety expressed in the late 1970's and early 1980's.

A contrary view of the past decade is offered by the Open Door Community and other advocates for the homeless. They remain troublesome reminders in the 1990's that this trumpeted prosperity has left the poor and homeless largely untouched. And their voices are confirmed by other signs that continue to cloud attempts to present a bright image of the present. In December 1990 four homeless men died in a fire at an abandoned downtown nightclub where they had sought shelter. In a incredibly ironic story, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported in early 1991 that two homeless men had been arrested for stealing coins from the reflection pool at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center. The pool surrounds the tomb of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the men had taken \$6.36 from it.

The contrast in perceptions between those holding political and economic power and those on the underside is not unique to Atlanta. This difference is, in fact, paradigmatic of developments in the United States which mark the last decade and contain ominous implications for the future. In simplest terms, the rich have been getting richer and the poor have been getting poorer. The middle class, meanwhile, has experienced an increasing financial squeeze. The House Ways and Means Committee reported in the fall of 1990 that between 1979 and 1987 the poorest fifth of American families became 9 percent poorer and the richest fifth became 19 percent richer. A report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities showed that the richest 1 percent saw their income grow 87 percent while the take home pay of the poorest fifth fell 5.2 percent. By the end of the decade, the poorest fifth of the American people was left with less than 5 percent of the nation's income while the richest fifth grabbed more than 40 percent.

The Open Door Community confronts daily what many of us want to hide and deny: the people being crushed by the realities to which these statistics point. The community argues that both the growing number of people out on the streets and the bulging prison population across the nation reflects an economic system failing to serve human needs. Increasing numbers of people are being excluded from meaningful participation in both the economic and political life of the nation.

Those who started the Open Door, and those who have joined the community over the years, are part of a public Christian response to this injustice and oppression in our society. The Open Door Community is but one of many intentional Christian communities across the United States. Together they resist and condemn an economic system and governmental policies based on the assumption that prosperity for all results from favoring a few.

More mainline Christian voices have also been highly critical of the direction of economic and political life in the United States. The Roman Catholic Bishops of the United States, for example, stated in their 1986 pastoral letter on the U.S. economy that “the precarious economic situation of so many people and so many families calls for examination of U.S. economic arrangements.” “That so many people are poor in a nation as rich as ours,” the bishops continued, “is a social and moral scandal that we cannot ignore.” They offered six principles by which to evaluate economic, political and social life:

1. Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person.
2. Human dignity can be realized and protected only in community.
3. All people have a right to participate in the economic life of society.
4. All members of society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable.
5. Human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community.
6. Society as a whole, acting through public and private institutions, has the moral responsibility to enhance human dignity and protect human rights.

The life of the Open Door Community, its work with the homeless and imprisoned, and its efforts to seek justice give concrete expression to these principles. In its life and actions the community tells mainline Christians that it is not enough to issue policy statements; what is needed are communities that embody the principles and virtues of those statements. Community members consistently state in their deeds and their words that when people must stand in line for food, for shelter, or for a shower and clothes, there is something fundamentally wrong in our economic system. In the same light the community, finds that there is something terribly askew when the only solution to violence our political system can uncover is further violence in the form of dehumanizing prison conditions and executions. People of faith cannot stand remain idle in the face of these conditions and abdicate their responsibility to the state.

But what alternative does the Open Door offer for the future? In terms of a large scale institutional change, the community only occasionally suggests specific policy recommendations. It does not see its task as that of a think tank or a denominational policy committee. Its primary task is to faithfully live the Gospel; only out of that commitment can it act and speak. And as a small community, it remains focused on the local level even as it sees its battle as part of a struggle against systems of oppression. The community believes that its engagement in specific actions aimed at accomplishing specific goals on behalf of the homeless or imprisoned are necessary steps toward larger

systemic change. The takeover of the Imperial Hotel was thus immediately directed toward the creation of single occupancy residential housing. This campaign continues with letter writing and public actions. At other times, we have seen the Open Door seek in its actions such achievable goals as public restrooms in the downtown area, replacements for park space lost to construction, and the opening of shelters by the city. All of these actions bring some change at the local level while also reminding people that a broad social response to the needs of the homeless must be put on the national agenda. Through demonstrations and speaking at churches, public meetings, schools, or in the streets, community members continually seek to make people aware of the connections between poverty, race, and the use of the death penalty in the United States.

If anything is clear from the history of the Open Door, it is that these efforts for justice are central to the life of the community. We have seen that their holistic spirituality and ethic insists that charity and justice cannot be separated without both becoming distorted. Love both presupposes and surpasses justice. Thus justice is really an expression of love in structural and institutional form. The love of the Open Door Community for people on the streets or in prisons is grounded in the love of Christ. Christ's love expressed in his life and death shattered social boundaries intended to exclude persons from fully sharing in life. In the actions and words of Christ, all persons are invited to share in the fullness of God's creation. At the banquet in the Kingdom of God, all are welcomed and fed. This Kingdom vision sustains the actions of the community on behalf of justice. Because they have received life from the gracious acts of God, they seek to give freely, to seek the good of others in justice. For the same reasons, the more personal actions of visiting a prisoner or serving soup to a homeless person are grounded in Christ's love. The Christ comes in the guise of the stranger.

In the early 1990's, there is evidence that the Open Door Community and others who seek to share life in which the stranger is welcomed as Christ will face increasing difficulties. A U.S. Conference of Mayors survey published in early winter of 1990 found public tolerance toward the homeless and hungry declining in the face of a growing recession in the U.S. economy. The survey also noted that food requests were up 22 percent and the demand for emergency shelter increased 24 percent in the past year. The public's loss of patience with the homeless expresses a growing frustration with a poverty that stubbornly testifies to the inadequacy of our economic system. It also gives evidence of continuing racism in American society. In the United States, African-Americans account for 48 percent of the homeless while constituting only about 10 percent of the population.

The increases in the building of prisons and the continual support for the death penalty also point to a society which punishes those on the margins. The statistics are clear enough. Those most likely to end up on death row for a murder conviction are poor and black. A painstaking study by David Baldus of all homicides and the sentences given in the state of Georgia reveals that among all persons indicted for the murder of whites, African-American defendants receive the death penalty nearly three times as often as white defendants: 22 percent to 8 percent. This study served as the basis for the McCleskey Supreme Court case in 1987. The court ruled that though there may be

systemic racial discrimination in the application of the death penalty, specific evidence of such discrimination is needed to overturn a death penalty verdict. The majority opinion in the McCleskey decision observed that arguments about the racial bias of the death penalty “are best presented to the legislative bodies.” Over 2,250 people are now under sentence of death in U.S. prisons. Recent polls indicate support for the death penalty remains near 80 percent. Abolishing the death penalty continues to appear a remote goal.

As the Open Door enters its second decade, it fully recognizes the difficulty of sustaining the vision of Christ in the stranger who is homeless or on death row. It is, the community confesses, impossible without God. Members of the Open Door can see Christ in the homeless person or the prisoner on death row because God gives them this vision. This vision has deep biblical roots. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Israelites are told: “You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9) Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, faithfulness to God’s covenant is judged by treatment of strangers. (Dt 10:18-19, Ps 146:9, Jer 7:6, Ezek 22:29) In Matthew 25, Jesus tells the crowd and his disciples: “When you did this to the least of these, you did it to me.” On the road to Emmaus, the resurrected Christ appears to two disciples. They do not recognize him until the breaking of the bread. The author of the letter to the Hebrews writes: “Let love for one another continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” (Hebrews 13:1-2) Paul writes the Corinthians: “God gives to the poor. God’s justice endures forever. God who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed and cause the harvest of your justice to continue.” (2Cor 9:9-10)

In this spirit of the scriptures, community members find that their prayer is made fervent by their work. When they share the bread of the Eucharist, they share the food of the soup kitchen. When they wash each other’s feet, they are cleansed with those in the shower line. When they join hands to share their hopes and fears, their concerns come from the streets and prisons. Murphy stresses that the community’s work, in which they seek to see Christ under the guise of the stranger, requires that it be a worshipping community:

If we were not persons of faith we wouldn’t have the resources to deal with an execution of a friend. We wouldn’t have the resources to face the line at our door every day. Prayer, sacrament, worship – are central. We have to work out of a context in which the belief that healing is possible is central. Our grief is shared, just as our joy is. God’s heart is breaking too when we execute a person, when we turn a person away because the soup kitchen has ended. That breaks God’s heart. And that’s the God we serve – a God with a broken heart.

The Open Door believes that Christians can and ought to be concerned about social policies, about institutional change, and large scale efforts to create a more just society. But this focus on broad social change in the future should not become an excuse for personal inaction now. The big changes come slowly. Meanwhile persons are suffering and dying in our streets and prisons. Rather than despair because the structures of economic and political life seem deaf to the cries of those on the margins, the community calls for patient work and public activism sustained by relations with homeless and imprisoned persons.

Thus the community seeks to embody what the feminist theologian Sharon Welch has called an “ethic of risk.” This ethic recognizes that there are no guarantees of decisive systemic change in the near future or even in our own lifetime. Yet it refuses to despair and continues to resist the powers of death. The ethic of risk is grounded in the realization “that to stop resisting, even when success is unimaginable, is to die.” The Open Door believes that to give in to the powers of death, to say all action in service or protest is fruitless, denies faith in the life-giving liberation of Jesus Christ.

Ed expresses this “ethic of risk” when he writes about possible alternatives to the death penalty. He argues, “The Bible is a book about the struggle and ultimate victory of life over death. Biblically informed people and traditions oppose death in all of its dehumanizing manifestations.” He finds two biblical passages at the center of his belief and action:

I am now giving you the choice between life and death. Between God’s blessing and God’s curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Choose life.” (Dt 30:19)

Love never gives up. (1Cor 13:7)

Ed relates these “two biblical norms of commitment to life and the never-ending hope for forgiveness, reconciliation and new life” to the political necessities of “security of state (controlling violence against citizens)” and “the possibilities of major changes within the criminal justice system.” He offers no easy answers, but calls for “a conversation” so that new possibilities can emerge to bring an end to the death penalty.

This conversation does not mean passivity. Ed writes that “as we wait for the concrete ways to work faithfully and lovingly in this world which belongs to our God, let us act.” These actions are a mixture of personal conversion and public action:

First, we must pray for peace and the end of a system of violence and oppression. Also, we must live a life of resistance to the cultural values which choose death on so many levels of personal and national life. We need to write letters every week. First, get personally related to a death row prisoner by mail. Second, let us write to our representatives and newspaper editors especially concerning the cost and judicial chaos of the death penalty. Discover the role of your local district attorney. Does your D.A. work for life or death? At the terrible times of execution, please come to a vigil.

In a similar spirit, Elizabeth Dede suggests three steps ordinary persons can take to begin making changes to end homelessness and abolish the death penalty. The first is to stop measuring our lives in terms of material success. She writes:

We simply are not following Jesus’ teachings when we are concerned with things. Luke records that Jesus taught his followers “Happy are you poor; the kingdom of God is yours.” ...If we are Christians we are supposed to be seeking God’s kingdom. Yet most of us are not poor or hungry, and many of us do not have active involvement with the poor and hungry. If our lives are filled with material

goods we should be concerned, I think, because God is going to send us away empty. In fact, we probably already are empty because our shallow lives have missed the depths of God's love for the hungry and the poor.

In the second step, she stresses that “we must begin to act in ways that recognize Jesus’ presence in our lives now.” Her logic is simple: “Jesus identifies himself with the least, so if we are to see Jesus, we must look among the poor and needy, and if we want to be with Jesus, then we must be with the poor.”

Finally it is necessary to build a community that will provide a base of support in the daily taking of these steps. Elizabeth recalls the example of the early church described in the second chapter of Acts:

All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. (Acts 2:44-47)

She finds that this biblical account seriously questions whether Christian communities can rest easy with a capitalism that “bleeds the life out of some while others prosper at a disproportionate rate.” Elizabeth concludes by asking us to imagine “the joyous feasts that would take place in Atlanta if the lonely developers of Underground would share their evening dinners with the hungry and homeless of Atlanta.”

Community members admit that it is unlikely that such a joyous feast representing the Kingdom of God will occur in the near future. But consistent with an “ethic of risk,” this does not deter them from offering their own forms of that feast. When the Open Door serves grits at Butler Street and soup at 910, a sign of the Kingdom is present. If the structures of injustice are resistant to change, the community seeks in love to keep pushing and hoping for transformation. This kind of love serves and presses for justice.

Numerous volunteers share the risk of this Kingdom vision with the Open Door. They work with the community and drink deeply of God’s love and God’s quest for justice. Taking time from busy schedules of family, work, or school, these volunteers form the extended community of the Open Door. Some have been sharing in the life and work of the community since the beginning. Others have joined in more recently. From all of these volunteers a few may be selected as examples.

For eight years Millie Deanes has come to the Open Door to cook the Friday night meal. A teacher, Millie began bringing some of her students to help prepare dinner when they asked if they could help. Millie believes that “all the academics in the world are not worth anything without exposure to how people really live.” The cornbread she and her students make is famous among community members. Willie Dee Wimberly who came to the Open Door as an alternative to being sentenced for criminal trespass (he was living

in a box behind an Atlanta restaurant) has succinctly observed that Millie's cornbread is "sweet as cake but more filling."

Down at Butler Street, Mrs. Ruby Evans has helped serve breakfast twice a week for almost five years. In her own life, she has experienced hunger when there wasn't enough food for her family. And she has worked hard in Atlanta hotels, first as a maid and then later as a cook. In a straightforward manner, she states her view of poverty and homelessness: "God made enough for everybody. There is no excuse for hunger. The least we can do in this rich country is give shelter to everyone. Get people off the street and out of the cold."

Ruth and "Duck" Duckworth have been weekly volunteers in the Wednesday soup kitchen. They are both retired teachers who live in the Virginia-Highlands neighborhood where the Open Door is located. Atlanta residents for over twenty years, they have seen many changes in the city. "Duck" notes that when he first came to Atlanta for a football game in 1939: "Ponce de Leon was an oak-shaded white man's boulevard, and many of the streets that crossed it suddenly changed their names to designate white vs. black neighborhoods. Segregation was a way of life." This type of segregation is no longer legal, but he wonders, "do we want to bring back the segregation of people because they are hungry, have no place to sleep, or no place to take care of normal body functions?" "Homelessness," he concludes, "is a problem that has been planted and well fertilized by our society. Like kudzu, it will continue to flourish until our priorities are changed."

Coming from churches, schools, by themselves, or as part of organizations, these volunteers, like the members of the Open Door Community, are ordinary folks who have decided to act on their faith. It is such faith which gives a vision of the future that calls for enactment now. The Open Door provides a place for these volunteers to live out that faith in working with the homeless and the imprisoned.

In this history I have sought to trace the small steps the Open Door Community takes toward liberation, toward the abolition of both homelessness and the death penalty. Along the way we have seen the Open Door witness to the conversion and liberation they seek for themselves and for our whole society. It is a conversion which promotes awareness of injustice while concretely engaging in acts of reconciliation. By their life together, the Open Door Community challenges the numerous forms of enslavement our society promotes: consumerism, the security of weapons, racism, and prisons. They ask people to come to their senses, to repent.

Repentance is the first step toward reconciliation and the creation of community. The Open Door invites this repentance through the recognition of our common redemption in Jesus Christ. Jesus' suffering and death witnesses to the fact that reconciliation does not come easily when the hurt and injustice is profound. It demands change that is often costly. Healing can come only through some suffering. There cannot be reconciliation without repentance. Thus the Open Door Community struggles to provide a place for awareness and reconciliation, a home where forgiveness can be shared. The community welcomes Christ who comes in the guise of the stranger and invites others to do the same.

As a community that grows out of Jesus' call to conversion, the Open Door describes itself as on a pilgrimage toward the Kingdom of God. There is a sense of wandering in the desert after beginning with the great moment of liberation. The New Testament tension, the reality of the Kingdom present, and the not-yet of the Kingdom to come is strongly felt in the Open Door Community. The very name of the community testifies to this eschatological tension. At the Open Door the doors remain closed and locked when community members need to rest at night. Still they work and hope for the day when all locks and keys will disappear. In this community, African-American, Hispanic and white, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, women and men attempt to break down the barriers of inequality and oppression. The barriers are strong. They have not all been overcome in the Open Door. The conversion still takes place, the new reality in Christ is acknowledged, even as the struggle continues with the principalities and powers.

This is the work the Open Door Community embraces as a result of conversion: to affirm the humanity of the homeless, of the imprisoned, and of those on death row by recognizing them as fellow creatures of God. This recognition means sharing life together in the love of Christ and the mutuality of human dignity he brings. The community stands with two of the open sores in American society: those places where the homeless and imprisoned are marginalized and condemned. Even though homelessness has received some public attention, few people seem willing to begin the serious work necessary to get at the causes and structures creating and sustaining it. The moral imagination, the vision of life necessary to achieve such changes is still lacking among both political leaders and most citizens. The homeless are still seen as non-persons, as threats to the downtown shoppers and business, and as a problem for bureaucrats to solve. The death penalty receives public attention in the form of sensationalism in media reporting around executions. Vengeance has become ever more popular as our way of life appears threatened on so many sides. In this context, it has perhaps become increasingly scandalous to ask, as the Open Door does, whether vengeance heals any wounds, or brings any reconciliation. Again, the moral imagination is lacking to see the death penalty as a tool to control the poor and African-Americans and as a basic affront to human dignity. In prayer, protest, and by coming to know those on death row as persons, the community seeks to stir the conscience of society and to hold to the hope of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Since the Open Door Community is led into its work by conversion and life with the poor, it is also sustained in that work by prayer and worship. The Eucharist flows out of the soup kitchen, the shower lines, and the prisons where Christ is met under the guise of the stranger. Without prayer, the work would grow burdensome, the disappointments would lead to discouragement, the Kingdom vision would turn to darkness. The activism of the community is rooted in the power of prayer, of meeting God in silence, in sacrament, and in the Word. Their life in common has integrity as their work and worship are bound together in service to God. This remains the ground upon which the Open Door is based even as it continues striving to live faithfully to the Kingdom vision in which all are welcome at God's banquet table.

Notes and Sources

The material for this book has been gathered from a wide variety of sources. The primary sources have been interviews of community members and my own experiences with the community which began in 1987. Other important sources include the Open Door's newspaper, *Hospitality*, local Atlanta newspapers, interviews with business and governmental leaders, and interviews with volunteers and former members of the Open Door. Additional sources are noted below as they were used in specific chapters.

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