

The Open Door Community

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Dear Friends,

This is a letter we never thought we would have to write, and it's breaking our hearts.

We have come to a time that the Open Door Community cannot move forward in the way that we have lived and worked for the past 35 years. While we plan to continue some parts of our ministry including our newspaper, *Hospitality*, we anticipate that in January 2017 our house at 910 Ponce de Leon Avenue, the location of our residential community and hub of our ministry, will close. The building will close; some of the ministry will continue. There are three primary reasons for this change.

For a number of years, as the six of us who are the elder leaders have dealt with the ravages of time and various illnesses, we have worked to train a younger generation to take over the primary leadership of the various ministries. At many points we have had seasons of gifted, committed leadership, but for many reasons the younger ones have moved on: sometimes to marry and start a family elsewhere, sometimes to start a new work in another place, and sadly, sometimes returning to the trap of addictions. Those of us in long-term leadership have always assumed that we would die doing this work and living the life in place at the Open Door. But at this point, there are not enough able-bodied, committed community members to continue our regular services *and* care for the elders as we begin to require more help.

Second, when we moved into our wonderful old home on Ponce de Leon, the neighborhood was a place where many

poor people — both housed and homeless — lived. We served food and hospitality to folks from personal care homes and from the streets. For many years we provided 10-12,000 meals each month, serving seven days a week. We provided showers and clean clothes for hundreds. We added two free medical clinics and a foot clinic. But now the neighborhood has changed drastically as a result of concerted public policy, escalating property values and police work geared to “moving the homeless on.” The personal care homes for the mentally ill are now offices and single family dwellings; the railroad tracks where many homeless folks camped have been transformed into the Beltline. The men seeking work at the “catch out corner” have, in large part, been moved out by police and security guards. Our area is fully gentrified and it has become an inhospitable space for the homeless poor. We serve meals to fewer people, and even our holiday meals that typically served 500, now serve only 300 or so. We anticipate that shortly there will be very few of the homeless poor in this area of the city.

Third, we have been increasingly aware that our 100-year-old building is requiring too much money and work to keep up. As many of you — our loving and generous donors — know, we have had to spend many thousands of dollars in the past two years to replace the roof, repair and refurbish our heavily used shower room, and just now, to replace our aged sewer pipes and fix drainage problems that were flooding our basement with every heavy rain. (Construction and more paving near us have caused run-off that overwhelmed existing drainage systems.)

We have agonized over this dilemma for several years now, believing there would be some way to continue. But we have come to a place now that we must say that the thirty-five years of our work and our community in Atlanta are coming to an end. Our building is half-owned by the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, and we are in conversation about the sale of the building. We are working to see that all the long-term community members are relocated to housing and support, and the six elders in leadership will move to live closer to family: Dick and Gladys to Vancouver, Washington; Nelia and Calvin to Nashville, Tennessee; and Ed and Murphy to Baltimore, Maryland. Because all of us sold our homes and divested to join community and we have lived without salary, insurance or a pension plan, the sale of the building will provide a small stipend for each couple to afford low-income housing, and hopefully some further funds for the ministry.

All of these changes will be taking place over a period of months. We are continuing to provide food, shelter, showers, clothing, medical care, foot care, prison visits, worship and a common life of hospitality and resistance work. We anticipate doing everything we can do, and when the time comes to close the door at 910 Ponce de Leon we will continue with a new vision of prison ministry, street advocacy and resistance work. We will continue to publish *Hospitality* and distribute the newspaper and other writings and books as we have in the past.

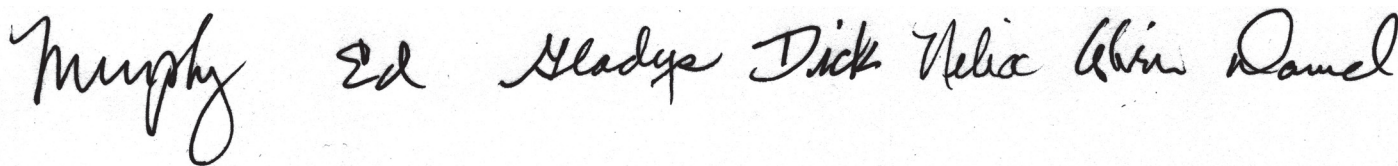
In our grief, it is hard to see how this decision can be part of the mandate of “good news to the poor”; but we must trust that in God’s providence, the seed that falls to the ground and dies will bear new fruit somehow, somewhere.

Mr. Willie Dee Wimberly, one of the many extraordinary saints who lived and died with us used to say, “We gonna do the best we can ‘til we can’t.” It is our hope to quote him again with authenticity. Hundreds of community members over the years have prayed and worked hard for the Open Door to be an oasis of love and service, of prayer and sacrament, of forgiveness, healing and transformation. You — our many friends far and near — in churches, synagogues, mosques, prison cells, monasteries, universities and the cold, mean streets — have helped us and prayed for us every step of the way. We have never been alone or without help and encouragement.

And we continue to need your help. Our financial needs for the work will continue as we serve and advocate for the homeless poor and prisoners. We are at work at 910 until sometime in 2017; we will continue — dispersed and on a smaller scale — after that.

The poor and wretched of the earth live in a world where, as Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo said, “Pain and death increase sixty minutes per second.” We live in dark days with the reality of perpetual war and ever-increasing violence and greed. But we are a people of engaged hope: everywhere that sisters and brothers join together to agitate for justice and in service to the poor and exploited, the light of hope shines on our path to lead us toward the Beloved Community.

This is our hope; this is our prayer. With gratitude for the journey and for your friendship on the way,



The Leadership Team:

Murphy Davis & Ed Loring, Gladys & Dick Rustay, Nelia & Calvin Kimbrough, David Payne