

Introduction, by Peter R. Gathje

The Open Door Community has, almost from its beginning, published *Hospitality* as a means to share, with a broader audience, its life with the homeless and imprisoned. The spirituality, ethics, and history of the Open Door Community can be gleaned from the newspaper's pages, as the many contributors have expressed what it means to meet and serve Christ in the guise of persons who are homeless, imprisoned, or on death row. In writing my history of the Open Door Community, *Christ Comes in the Stranger's Guise, Hospitality* was an invaluable resource for tracing the development of the Open Door from four people who started a night shelter at Atlanta's Clifton Presbyterian Church in late 1979 to the present community downtown at 910 Ponce de Leon Avenue. The present group numbers some twenty people and draws upon hundreds of volunteers from the Atlanta area and beyond to help with its many ministries with homeless and imprisoned persons.

As the Open Door celebrates its twentieth anniversary at 910 Ponce de Leon, it is fitting that we listen to the community's reflections on its life and work from the pages of *Hospitality*. Such reflections reveal the vitality and community tensions and offer several different views from within the Open Door. A large number of people from the community, and those from the extended Open Door Community, have written for *Hospitality*. This great variety made selecting articles for this book a rather difficult task. No doubt someone's favorite article will not be found, while others will wonder, "Why is *this* included?" It is a fair question to ask. Here I provide a rationale for the articles selected.

I selected articles that would best represent what I believe to be the Open Door's central faith convictions and its core social-political analysis, which is rooted in that faith. Thus, even in the more historical articles in the first part, one can begin to discern the convictions and analysis that led to the formation of the Open Door and that have continued to sustain its life. As one reads further, a certain repetition in theme becomes evident. This repetition is intended and testifies to the continuity in the community's spirituality, ethical vision, and

activism. This emphasis on the heart of the community has also meant that three authors are represented more than others: Murphy Davis, Ed Loring, and Elizabeth Dede. For those who know the history of the community this is no surprise, given that Murphy and Ed were two of the founders and Elizabeth has been a long-term member and partner.

I also selected articles that most directly expressed the Open Door's central ministries. The Open Door has focused on work with homeless people and with people in prison, in particular those on death row. In these ministries the community has sought to meet immediate needs, while also addressing the structural injustices that shape homelessness, the prison system, and the death penalty. The struggle for justice certainly includes other areas, and articles in *Hospitality* have discussed Latin and Central America, the Georgia-based School of the Americas, nuclear weapons, the Persian Gulf War, and, more recently, the war in Kosovo and the war on terrorism. Such articles are not included, however, in order to keep the focus on the work and issues that have been most clearly characteristic of the Open Door.

Finally, I selected articles that I thought would give readers a sense of the passion and vibrancy of the Open Door as it is grounded in a life of faith practiced in solidarity with "the least of these." This is perhaps the most subjective criterion. I hope that what is included is a fair representation of how the Open Door Community, in its life and in its newspaper, has kept solidarity with those crucified in our streets and prisons, while also sharing the liberating fullness of human life pledged by God in the resurrection of Jesus.

The articles are organized into six parts. In Part One, "Settling In," selections address the history of the Open Door and the theological and social-political convictions that undergird its work. Some of these articles also address the sources the Open Door has drawn upon in shaping its life. The most important source is the Bible, but the Open Door has also drawn from a rich tradition of socially transformative Christianity that includes the Social Gospel, liberation theology, the Catholic Worker movement, and the civil rights movement—especially as that was shaped by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Church. In drawing from these traditions, the Open Door stands within an emphasis on strong and countercultural Christian community as the context for shaping persons for nonviolent resistance to and transformation of a sinful and unjust society. In the afterword, I address more systematically the relation between the Open Door and the convictions and practices of the Catholic Worker movement.

Especially important in Part One is the interplay among the Open Door's convictions, the structures of community life (leadership, worship, daily organization), and its work with homeless and imprisoned persons. Creative tension among these three elements is evident in all of these selections. The Open Door's

theology is formed within the crucible of life with the poor and from the community's conviction, drawn in particular from Matthew 25:31–46, that in meeting the poor we meet Christ. Being the Body of Christ in the world enables the Open Door to live simply, to offer service to the poor, and to engage in efforts for justice for the poor. At the same time, Christ comes to the Open Door as the homeless person, as the person in prison and on death row. How to exist both as the Body of Christ and to receive Christ in the poor is a vital source of tension and hope at the Open Door.

Part Two, "Hospitality to the Homeless," analyzes homelessness from the perspective of the Open Door's theology, which begins with the conviction that Christ speaks to us in the homeless. Understanding homelessness as a Christian thus requires listening—learning from the homeless what it means to be homeless. This listening and learning is done with biblical ears attuned to God's Word, expressed by those who suffer injustice. God's Word as spoken through the experience of those on the streets challenges conventional economic and political thought. The economics of scarcity and the politics of fear—the foundations for injustice and violence—confront the economics of abundant generosity and the politics of mutual responsibility grounded in God's creative and redemptive work in the world. Biblical economics and politics replace hostility toward homeless persons with hospitality. As several articles make clear, one of the most visible manifestations of this struggle has been the Open Door's commitment to public space which is truly public. Attempts by worldly forces to exclude certain persons from community are manifest in battles over the presence of homeless people in parks and other public facilities. In approaching these battles, the Open Door reveals its commitment to a biblical vision of community.

In Part Three, "Hospitality to the Imprisoned," the community's theological analysis again shapes its ministry and its efforts to confront injustices in the criminal justice system—primarily the death penalty. The starting point, as with the homeless, is listening and learning from those in prison and on death row, and from their families. Those who speak from behind prison bars, like those on the streets, incarnate Christ. The warrant for that statement is the biblical text at the heart of the Open Door, Matthew 25:31–46, in which Jesus identifies with the poor, the stranger, and the imprisoned, and makes treatment of these persons the standard for entrance into heaven. These words are hard to hear regarding the homeless poor, but the difficulty increases with people in prison, because they have usually done clear harm to the human family. Articles in this section approach that difficulty with a biblical faith shaped by God's faithfulness to sinful humanity—a faithfulness that never despairs of redemption, and that, through Jesus' cross and resurrection, has definitively overturned the death penalty. This faith also recognizes what we often deny—that our sinfulness, manifested in a system that despises the poor, contributes mightily to the evils

that lead people into criminal life. The Open Door's willingness to learn from and to stand in faith with those in prison and on death row makes clear the cost of discipleship and the grace needed to embrace that cost.

Part Four, "The Sacraments of Hospitality," brings further focus to the Open Door's embrace of Christ, who comes to us as the homeless and imprisoned. Those on the streets and in prison are a sacrament of Christ, and in the celebration of the Church's sacraments the community's commitment to receive and serve the wounded and crucified Christ is renewed. The Open Door's worship reflects both traditional Christian practices such as Eucharist and baptism, along with new forms of worship such as foot washing, and liturgies of solidarity and protest conducted in the streets and parks of Atlanta. The public implications of worship are made clear as the Open Door continually connects its worship with its work among the homeless and imprisoned. This is evident, for example, in how the Open Door spends Holy Week on the streets, experiencing the crucifixion of Christ in the homeless. Likewise, in the fall, the Open Door again goes to the streets during its Festival of Shelters, which parallels the Jewish Festival of Booths, recalling the Israelites' desert wanderings before entering the Promised Land.

One of the important themes that emerges in this section on worship is the need to hold together liturgy and justice. As the prophets and Jesus proclaimed, worship that does not shape us in the practice of justice is idolatry. The God of the prophets and of Jesus tells us that God desires mercy, not sacrifice, and that the Sabbath is for human liberation, not human enslavement (Matt. 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–3:6). Worship as practiced by the Open Door offers the grace and challenge to enter into life with the poor, which is life with Christ. This worship stands opposed to therapeutic worship that reduces faith to individual affirmation, or worship as mere entertainment, which offers an escape from moral responsibility. The succor in the Open Door's worship enables service. The respite from the day's tasks that worship creates is for a renewed spirit in the justice struggle.

Part Five, "Saints and Martyrs," contains stories of the community's guides. In other sections, too, there are references to those who have shaped the community's life—see, for example, Murphy Davis's reflections on Jerome Bowden in "Dorothy Day: The Only Solution Is Love," or Elizabeth Dede's article, "Jeannette Lewis: A Debt Which I Can Never Repay"—but in this section there is more fleshing out of certain individuals' importance. The stories here show the complexity of the persons the Open Door Community has embraced and been embraced by over the years. The mystery and dignity of each person and the challenge to reach out to those from different circumstances are prominent themes.

That some of the persons are the community's saints will be readily apparent. But that some of the stories are about martyrs may be less evident. A *mar-*

tyr is a witness; the word has usually referred to persons who have died in witness to a particular cause or ideology. How is a person who dies on the streets or who is executed by the state a martyr? To what are they witnessing? In part they provide a negative witness; they witness against what ought not to be. The death of a homeless person is a witness against our society's inhumanity. For a person to die on the streets of the wealthiest nation in world history gives witness to that nation's spiritual poverty. It gives witness to our refusal to recognize as brother or sister those made vulnerable by our economic system and by their own faults and foibles. Those executed are likewise martyred by our refusal to recognize our responsibility for compassion rather than abandonment. The martyrs' stories in this section concern failure that is both personal and structural. As martyrs' stories ought to do, these stories leave us with the call to conversion, which is to work for structural transformation.

Part Six, "The Theology of Hospitality," contains theological reflections directed outward. These selections focus less on homelessness, the death penalty, or the community's own life, and more on trends in the Church and American society that intersect with the Open Door's life and work. Several articles consider what it means to be "church"; others engage in biblical interpretation; others reflect theologically on American life. This broader view offers a good place to end, for it calls readers to consider how the Open Door's life and work should intersect our lives and work. For some that intersection may mean coming to the Open Door as a resident volunteer, or eventually becoming a partner. For others it may mean becoming (or continuing) as a weekly or monthly volunteer, preparing breakfast, serving soup, or driving families to prison for visits. The intersection could also mean joining the community's acts of solidarity and protest, spending twenty-four hours on the streets, making vigil against the death penalty, or disrupting—in some creative and joyful way—business as usual at the state Capitol or at city council meetings. The intersection may come through worship, either in person at the Open Door or through prayer in one's own community. For some the intersection may mean joining or continuing work at home that is similar to the Open Door's. Whatever form the intersection takes, most important is that we respond to these articles' call for recognizing and listening to Christ as he speaks in the homeless, the imprisoned, and those on death row, and as he calls us to solidarity, service, and the struggle for justice. If we do that, we will be welcomed by Christ as we have welcomed him, and we shall one day hear, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34).