

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.