

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.