

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.