

## ***Introduction***

It was in the winter of 1987 that I first heard of the Open Door Community and its work with the homeless and imprisoned. As a student at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, I was looking for a master's thesis topic that would combine my interests in Christian ethics and political action. One of my professors, Hendrikus Boers, suggested that I look into the Open Door Community in Atlanta. John Barbour, a runner friend of mine who had been a volunteer with the community for several years, told me more about the place. The Open Door did more than serve the homeless and imprisoned in a variety of ways, he said. It also engaged in protests to dramatize the injustice suffered by people on the streets or in prisons. Through John, a meeting was set up for me with Ed Loring, a founding partner of the community.

I met with Ed and explained what I hoped to do in terms of my research. There was some skepticism on his part. Was I just another academic hoping to observe and dissect the community? Actually I was that. But I told Ed that I also wanted to begin volunteer work with the community, and that when summer came I wanted to live at the Open Door as a resident volunteer. This "participant observation" would be crucial for understanding the people and work of the place. I also recalled my own experience with community life as a Benedictine monk for almost three years. This experience and my willingness to join in the life of the Open Door, Ed later told me, were important factors in the community's decision to let me research and write about them.

About a week after this interview I went with community members to help serve the Butler Street breakfast. I was filled with trepidation. I had no previous contact with homeless people and I didn't know any of the community members. On the way to Butler Street C.M.E. Church, the Open Door's old green van stalled at almost every intersection. The driver, Dietrich Gerstner, came to the community from West Germany. His driving might have been acceptable on the "autobahn" but it was terrifying on the streets of Atlanta. Along the way I was regaled with stories of disasters that had occurred on other mornings while serving breakfast. It was, I found out later, typical of the humor community members often employ to release the sorrow and fears they face in their work. That morning it simply made me more anxious.

In speaking with other volunteers over the next several months I found that my fears that morning were not so unusual. The homeless initially seem so different from those who, like me, come from middle class backgrounds to volunteer at shelters or soup kitchens. What I – and others – have quickly realized, however, is that these fears are unfounded. Homeless persons are human beings who are surviving as best they can under extremely inhuman circumstances. At Butler Street I found men, women, and on some mornings, children, who were incredibly friendly and forgiving in the face of horrendous conditions. Over the next months, I also occasionally encountered some very angry persons, mad at being cold and hungry and rejected. Their anger appeared to me quite rational, given their situation.

While serving grits I had the chance to talk with community members, with volunteers from the church, and with folks from the streets. It was a world quite different from the

small town in Minnesota where I had grown up. The blend of poverty, joblessness, and race was unfamiliar. How could there be lines of people every morning for breakfast in a country as rich as the United States? How could the city of Atlanta afford to set aside millions of dollars in federal aid for the development of Underground Atlanta when people remained homeless in city streets?

When summer came I moved in with the community. My room was in the basement of the large old building the Open Door calls home. It was sparsely furnished with a mattress on the floor, a chair, and a desk. I had returned to monastic life. Only this monastery was in the city. The noise from the street seemingly never stopped. And the people there were tightly bound up with the problems and pressures of the homeless and imprisoned.

The prison ministry at first seemed quite remote from the daily life of the community. But then it took on a terrible concreteness. Four executions were conducted by the state of Georgia while I lived at the Open Door. The men killed were close to the community, especially to Murphy Davis, who is central to the community's prison ministry. The Open Door led vigils of protest at the state capitol building before each execution. One of the men executed requested that the Open Door conduct his funeral.

It struck me that the actions of the community reflected the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick, ransoming the captive, and burying the dead. Later it became clear to me why the community engages in these works. I learned that from its beginning the community has seen its mission in light of Matthew 25 from which this list of works is largely drawn. These works, theologians have noted, testify to our solidarity in sin and our common need for redemption and healing. The central belief of the Open Door, based on Matthew 25, is that Christ comes under the stranger's guise, and specifically Christ is known among the homeless poor and the imprisoned.

But I also learned that this community believes mercy without justice is a hollow manner in which to serve the poor who come as Christ. Mercy, charity, or love is the basis of justice and its fulfillment. In serving soup or visiting prisoners, the Open Door anticipates a time when there will be plenty for all and no one will be cast out from community. These works of mercy are seen as sacraments, symbols of the justice that is sought. For this reason, the Open Door always connects its works of charity with calls for a more just society, for the creation of the beloved community of which Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke.

This call for justice takes many forms. While I lived at the Open Door I went with community members once a week to Woodruff Park in downtown Atlanta. There we handed out leaflets concerning the destruction of Plaza Park and its effect on the homeless. The park had long been a place of refuge for homeless persons and it was being destroyed in the construction of Underground Atlanta. The community was urging the city to develop a green space to replace Plaza Park, a place where the homeless could find some respite and would not be hassled by the police. The community was also pressing the city to meet the needs of the homeless for public restrooms and other

facilities instead of confronting homeless persons with punitive measures such as a proposed “vagrant free zone” in the downtown area.

Banging on soup pots, singing spirituals and protest songs, the community marched from the park to city hall. More leaflets were handed out and a mini-rally was held on the steps. The actions always generated a lot of attention. It seemed to provide a constant reminder to downtown shoppers and business people that business as usual in the city was leaving people on the streets. Often it was a reminder that irritated the lunchtime crowd in the park.

Over the course of my six weeks with the Open Door I engaged in interviews, both formal and informal, to get a sense of who the people were who formed the community. I worked with them in the soup kitchen, the shower line, and in various other tasks. I met and talked with Carolyn and Rob Johnson who had helped start the Open Door, but had recently left. The resident volunteers and members of the community from the streets and prisons were a diverse group: old, middle-aged, and young; white and black; those with college degrees and those struggling to pass the G.E.D. The variety of experiences could sometimes cause tensions, but it also provided the background for incredibly rich conversations. The different perspectives offered on events in the city, the nation, or the world, left me with a sense of my own partiality. I became convinced of the need for a plurality of views to gain a clearer vision of truth.

It was to some degree the same conviction which led community members almost from the start to spend periods of time on the streets with homeless persons. Although recognizing that these twenty-four hours on the streets are artificial, the Open Door sees them as giving an inkling of the hardships homeless people face. This time on the streets also helps to break down the barriers that naturally arise among community members serving in the soup kitchen, the shower line, or in some other work, and the homeless who are served. By sharing a “cathole,” a homeless person provides hospitality just as those from the Open Door had provided hospitality serving soup. During Holy Week community members spend extended periods of time on the streets, and they do the same in the fall when they hold their “Festival of Shelters.” Exhaustion, hunger, and cold marked my time on the streets. I saw an Atlanta that is not advertised by Central Atlanta Progress or touted by Olympic organizers.

While at the Open Door, I also experienced the intensity of the community’s worship that renews their life together and marks different times and tasks during the day. The prayer of the community provides the foundation for their work. In turn their work shapes the concerns they raise in prayer. Community members draw connections between the Eucharist and the soup kitchen, between the ritualized washing of feet and the shower line. There is in the Open Door Community a holistic connecting of prayer and work, just as there is an integrity of works of mercy and justice. The community constantly affirms that faith and daily life are a continuum.

This does not mean that community members are a pietistic bunch. In my experience, both living with the community and since, the Open Door often overflows with a vitality and a humor that is unexpected in a place that embraces those who hurt and suffer. The

colors and fashion of the community are evident on “Tie Day” when everyone dons the gaudiest, widest, and most polyester of the ties that come in with donated clothes. Birthdays provide not only a rare treat of cake and ice cream, but also opportunity for stories that “roast” the birthday person. Halloween occasions visits to the clothes closet where one can weave a nightmare out of donated finery. And one never quite gets over the ironic and joyful conviction in Ed Loring’s occasional eschatological shout, “It won’t be long now!”

In the Open Door Community I see connections with biblical stories of conversion in which persons come to understand God in a new way, and this changes their lives. These are ordinary people who have been called by God to leave behind their human securities and entrust their lives to this God who is found among the poor.

In the scriptures conversion means liberation. The Israelites leave the fleshpots and slavery of Egypt. God leads them into the desert with Moses. Liberation means leaving the job security of the fishing nets and following the itinerant preacher named Jesus. It means leaving behind the slavery of death and embarking upon a new life. In the Gospel Jesus proclaims the reality of love, and the enduring power of life over death. He invites ordinary women and men to join him in a passionate life, to have the courage to live in truth, and to reject the falsehoods which prey on human fear.

The story of the Open Door Community begins with the conversion of four persons: Murphy Davis, Ed Loring, Carolyn and Rob Johnson. Their experiences during the 1960’s with the Civil Rights and the Anti-War Movements made them critical of American society. They saw the destructive tendencies of this society continuing in the inhuman conditions imposed upon the homeless and the imprisoned. They sought an alternative to a society structured by self-interest, individualism and consumerism. Drawing upon a continuing tradition in Christian faith, they realized that a community shaped by the Gospel and its call to peace and justice could provide a powerful context for resistance.

The Open Door Community thus shares in the tradition of Christian communities founded upon Christ’s proclamation of the alternative order of the Kingdom of God. Such communities, by the character of their lives together, stand against and challenge the ethos of their day. The early monastic movements resisted the domestication of the Christian faith in the Constantinian era. Later, Benedictine monasticism preserved the peace and hospitality of Christ amidst the bloody chaos of the disintegration of Roman society. St. Francis and his followers called the church of the middle ages to identify with the poor rather than with the rich and powerful. Radical reformers such as Menno Simons summoned Christians in the 16th century to reject violence and to live simply in faith. In a similar manner, the Quakers advocated an unadorned faith, and rejected slavery as incompatible with the Christian faith.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, numerous alternative religious communities emerged in the United States that also shared in this tradition. The spirit of all these past communities still lives in modern forms in the Catholic Worker Movement, Koinonia, Sojourners Community, and the Community for Creative Nonviolence, among others. At the Open

Door many elements of that tradition were also being continued: charismatic leadership; tensions between ideals and social realities; and the belief that a small community can witness to the need for profound social change. Aware of this tradition and drawing upon its resources, the Open Door Community recognizes the power of the Gospel to form people of peace, truth and justice. In community, people can stand together in opposition to the values and social structures which wield death and claim absolute rule over human life.

Members of the Open Door Community openly admit that they struggle to live this converted life. This conversion requires that they recognize and reject the powerful idols set up in American society to take the place of God: idols of national security, of conspicuous consumption, of putting profits before people, of race and class. Conversion means they can no longer rely on those idols for their sense of identity and security. It means relying on the God who stands with the poor in love and demands justice. As the Open Door Community hears the Word of God, conversion means turning away from what is generally conceived of as success and turning toward life with the hungry, the homeless, and the imprisoned. The community remains a precarious experiment in love, for it stands against the “powers and principalities” in American society that seek the destruction of human dignity and thus deny God’s intent for human life.

The Open Door Community seeks to live this conversion in Atlanta, Georgia. In the past thirty years Atlanta has rapidly grown to become one of the largest urban centers in the South. It presents stunning contrasts of wealth and poverty, booming development and wealth set against a quarter of the population falling below the poverty level. It prides itself as the birthplace of Martin Luther King, Jr. and as a place where African-Americans hold political power, yet the city’s economic power is still largely held by white businessmen.

In this city, what does it mean to become a community of resistance? What work needs to be done? The Open Door lives in solidarity with those they serve. In the midst of the poor the community takes up the Bible, reads, reflects, and prays. They seek to analyze how class, race, and gender are used to create institutions that deny human dignity. They see that homelessness and prisons and electric chairs reflect these social factors. The community ministers to those injured because of class, race, or gender. It stands in opposition to the evil structures built upon these differences. The Open Door continues the tradition of Christian resistance with its insistence on the radicality of the Gospel which undercuts oppression based on difference.

A wide variety of people have come to the Open Door and contributed to its work and its vision of the Kingdom of God. Some have personal histories similar to the founders of the community. They come to the Open Door uneasy with the “American dream.” The dream has not personally failed them, but they see that it demands complicity with oppression and so it is contrary to faith in Christ. With this realization – this conversion – their previous lives as ministers, carpenters, teachers, nurses, students, or accountants are overturned. Seeking a new way of life based on the Gospel they come to the Open Door.

From the start of the community, there have also been people from the streets and prisons who find at the Open Door a place to renew their lives. For example, Robert Barrett stayed at the night shelter at Clifton and moved with the community to 910 Ponce de Leon. The path of those like Robert is very different from those who joined the Open Door from the middle class. Persons from the streets and prisons come to the Open Door not by choice, but by need. Homeless and living in the streets, or just out of prison, they are invited into the community. Of the many who have responded, some have stayed and become partners in the community. Resurrected from the death of the streets and the prisons, they now share their new lives by aiding their brothers and sisters. Much of the variety and depth of the Open Door Community's life comes from the sharing of life by these members of the community from the streets and prisons with those members drawn from the middle class.

One could tell the story of the Open Door Community in a number of different ways. In writing about the Open Door, I have relied on my own experience with the community over the past three years, on interviews, and on articles written by community members. I have tried to give a sense of the people and the places which make up the community. The people of the Open Door are the focus of this history. I have sought to weave together the number of smaller stories which have shaped the community over the past ten years. Community members will tell how they came to the Open Door. These members and many of the people the community touches with its hospitality will tell what the Open Door means in their lives. We will hear the community speak of its work, its prayer, its protest, and its life together. In these stories, I have sought to understand what this community values and how their values are sustained by their vision of life and in their actions. I also have considered the place of the Open Door Community within American society. Two questions have especially been central. How does the Open Door offer a morally coherent alternative to the dominant values in American society? How does the community understand itself in relation to the Gospel as it is lived in the United States today? A third question has also tagged along, and perhaps it grounds the concerns of the previous two: what does the Open Door say to us about being Christian today?