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Liberation Gospel: A Study of Contemporary Radical Liberal Theology and Practice in the Southern United States

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Liberation Gospel: A Study of Contemporary Radical
Liberal Theology and Practice in the Southern United States

by

Jeannie M. Alexander

Under the Direction of Christopher White

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines current radical liberal Christian activism in the Southern United States through focusing upon a particular intentional community located in Atlanta, Georgia, The Open Door Community. Through praxis and reflection, this community has developed its own unique practice and theology that I have termed "Liberation Gospel." This thesis analyzes and describes a unique community in order to understand where the community succeeds, and where it does not, in putting its theological beliefs into practice. This very liberal community does not distinguish between their politics and their theology.

INDEX WORDS: intentional community, liberation theology, social gospel, radical Christianity, Open Door Community

LIBERATION GOSPEL: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY RADICAL LIBERAL THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE IN THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES

by

Jeannie M. Alexander

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

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Georgia State University

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A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin or a word of God that does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?

Bishop Oscar Romero

I. Introduction

The physical space of Open Door is a rambling 60+ room former apartment house located at 910 Ponce de Leon Avenue, an area always in transition and one marked by the contrast of Whole Foods and million-dollar houses on the one hand and the Clermont Lounge, abandoned warehouses, and a large homeless population on the other. The most common street name for Open Door is "910." In the winter the house is warm and, despite its size, affects a certain coziness; in the summer it is warm as well because the residents eschew the comforts of central air as a means of solidarity with the poor who cannot afford such comforts. The front porch, with its generous overhang, provides shelter during the rain, a patch of shade from the heat of the Atlanta summer sun, and refuge for some on cold windy nights. Upon entering one sees a modest mirror hanging on the right side wall surrounded by writing. The writing explains that a large mirror was mounted on the wall in the past, but in the spring of 2006 the mirror was smashed during an outpouring of anger and frustration by a homeless man from the yard.[1] The wall is now an ongoing project to turn the result of anger into a wall mural formed from the shattered pieces of the old mirror. In no small way the mural project reflects the telos of Open Door, to take shattered people and create with them something beautiful, the beloved community, that is more than the sum of its parts.

[1] The residents of Open Door commonly refer to the homeless people who partake of Open Door services as "our friends from the yard."

The house is well and warmly lit, and multiple ceiling fans provide relief from the summer heat, and also from the large industrial style kitchen that is constantly in use and motion. The dining room is large enough to comfortably hold 36 guests during meal time, although I have seen it hold many more, plus those who serve them. The dining room also serves as the home of the Harriett Tubman foot clinic on Thursday nights and the sanctuary for Sunday worship service. Wall sconces, anti war signs and cloth banners that read "peace" in multiple languages neatly line the walls on both sides of the dining room. Windows allow the sounds of life outside to come filtering through in all its many forms; often one hears the sound of shouts and laughter in the early hours before Monday and Tuesday morning breakfast. All of the tables have vinyl tablecloths and a centerpiece of flowers, salt & pepper, and hot sauce. At the far end of the room between two doors leading out to a covered porch hangs a cross. The cross, which changes according to the phase of the liturgical year, is one of the many ways that the artistic talents housed at Open Door find expression. During Advent 2006 the cross was replaced by an intricate and striking floor to ceiling tapestry of a very pregnant African-American Mary in the foreground of a city with the words "Be not afraid" embroidered across the bottom. The tapestry brings s biblical message into the present: Mary becomes an African-American woman seeking shelter in the City of Atlanta, and again there is no room in the inn. The angel's exhortation to the shepherd, to "be not afraid," also resonates in these walls. There may be no room in the inns of Atlanta for the anxious and weary, but there will be room in this place, in the dining room and living room of Open Door, if only for a few hours.

Across the hall from the dining room is the living room, a cozy area where friends from the yard as well as residents spend hours socializing while waiting a turn in the sorting room, clinic, or showers. The hearth mantle in the living room is peppered with photos of former residents and friends of Open Door who are now deceased. The dead are palpably present at Open Door. Their ashes are mixed into the earth, and their memories invoked during the yearly celebration of the Day of the Dead. There are memorial plaques on the privacy fence surrounding the back-yard, plaques that tell stories of men found dead in their sleep on a back-yard bench, or of men whose ashes are now part of the dark loamy soil near the dumpster. Perhaps it is important to remember the homeless in death because in life they were so often not seen. When the homeless die they often remain unidentified and unclaimed, and so Open Door engages in yet another work of mercy, the work of burying the dead, and the work of remembering that the dead have names and stories to be told.

There is no lack of art on display at Open Door. The halls and walls of the various rooms are filled with murals of Catholic Workers such as Philip and Daniel Berrigan and Dorothy Day, and civil rights activist such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. There is also African American folk art, posters of jazz musicians, and Catholic Worker art such as "Christ of the Breadline" by Fritz Eichenberg. The individual rooms or apartments where people live are named for activist and religious figures both local and international, including the Karen Thomas Room, the Berrigan Room (my own home away from home), the Dorothy Day Room, the Gandhi Room, and the Ida B. Wells Room among many others. The walls are also lined with hundreds of photographs of the housed and un-housed people who constitute the extended community

of Open Door, and of recent events and political actions in which members of Open Door have participated. Above the photos of un-housed members of the extended community is an exhortation in Spanish and English declaring that they are not numbers but names.

It is easy to see that Open Door is not a homeless shelter; nor does it look like the typical soup kitchen or church. Open Door looks and feels like something altogether different, a large comfortable home as eclectic as its residents. It is a sanctuary for the full-time residents as well as for those in the yard, and while not infrequently it finds itself in the eye of human storms and conflict, it is more often than not a place of peace and order. Open Door is one of the few places for many of the homeless to find peace and rest. Through decades of experience, the members of Open Door have come to believe that Atlanta, "the city too busy to hate," has ample time to pursue thousands of homeless who live in its streets, parks, gutters, and abandoned buildings.

Police are not allowed to enter Open Door without a warrant, and through the skilled use of non-violent conflict resolution it is seldom necessary to call the police to intervene in a conflict in the yard or the house. At Open Door the homeless are safe from the police. The homeless find sanctuary at Open Door, even from the police, because the residents of Open Door believe that Christ comes in the stranger's guise, and thus, what is done to the least among us is done to Christ. Once again the Bible becomes present in the modern world. The police and prisons are representatives of Caesar, guardians of empire, and Open Door is an apostolic enclave, one of the struggling communities on Paul's route. The criminal justice system crushes the least among us, the poor and the vulnerable, while serving as de facto housing for the homeless and mentally ill.

> Look, if you dare, at the court system – and see what happens to the poor. Look, if you can stand it, at the intent of our criminal-control system – look at the message for the poor. … Look at how the decisions that come from high benches and big offices crush the life and hope and human dignity of the poor … If you look, you will see that prisons are now the major government program for the poor in the United States. Prisons are our housing program for the poor.[2]

What Open Door is not, is the church as it presently exists. The church as it manifests itself in downtown Atlanta is surrounded by iron fencing and protected by armed guards. Accordingly, the sacred space created at Open Door cannot be understood as an expression of the conflict between the church and the world, rather, it is a space suspended between two worlds, not fully part of either, and in conflict with both.

With hundreds of people passing through the doors of Open Door five days a week, many of whom are mentally ill, physically ill, and/or high, order is the last thing one would expect to find. Yet through the din of conversation, laughter and occasional angry shouts, a sense of order does in fact underlie the daily workings of the community. There are house rules, all well and widely known, and there is always at least one point-person, the "house duty" person, who is the final arbiter and decision maker for the various and random issues that arise on a daily basis, and that require attention outside of the normal daily services offered. This level of order in the community is one of the primary reasons for the community's almost unheard of longevity, but it comes with a price. As founding partner Murphy Davis told me:

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[2] Murphy Davis, A Work of Hospitality, *A Bag of Snakes* 146-147 (Peter R. Gathje ed., 2002).

> Through the order of our lives we sacrifice a lot of spontaneity. We understand our home as a sanctuary and not as a place where people have the freedom to do their own thing. As a sanctuary it is a safe place to be sober, to be a woman, to be homosexual, to be black, and to be homeless, while trying to reduce the distance, and enter into solidarity. We have intentionally defined the order and structure of the community that orders the common life.[3]

With the exception of the L.A. Catholic Worker House, the clear structure and rules of Open Door set it markedly apart from other communities in the Catholic Worker movement.[4] The order, and by extension the rules, also come at the price of saying "no" to someone in need when you are otherwise capable of saying yes. All of the above facts concerning the physical space and internal workings of Open Door index its uniqueness and allow the practice of hospitality to take place in a distinct way. Food is *shared*, not simply handed out, and there are no counters to separate those who are volunteering from those receiving meals. The emphasis is on creating community; fundamental to community is touch and proximity.

Open Door is unique among intentional Christian communities in both its practice and its community membership. Residents of Open Door are multi racial, male and female, gay and straight, married and unmarried, well educated from upper class backgrounds, as well as uneducated and formerly homeless. Those who become residents of Open Door from either the streets or as a student, minister, etc., enter Open Door initially as a resident volunteer. After a period of time a resident volunteer may make a firmer commitment to life in community and become a novice. After anywhere

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[3] Interview with Murphy Davis, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 25, 2007).
[4] *Id.*

from one to two years as a novice, one may then become a partner of Open Door and live there on a permanent basis. None of the residents of Open Door work outside jobs, because being a resident of Open Door is a full time job in and of itself. Residents are allotted a weekly stipend of $11.00, and otherwise all of their needs are met by donations; they are mendicants. Residents and volunteers of Open Door practice the following works of mercy on an almost daily basis: giving shelter to those without housing, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner, clothing the naked, and burying the dead. Additionally, they practice their theological beliefs in the context of political activism at both a local and national level.

Before we proceed I think that it would be helpful to the reader if I locate myself within this text. I was involved with Open Door as a volunteer prior to engaging in research for this thesis. Specifically, I have been a regular volunteer at Open Door for about a year and a half, and on average I am there three days a week. I volunteer at Tuesday morning breakfast, Thursday night foot clinic, and I am the house duty person during the day on Fridays. I have also been active in the political arm of Open Door, The Martin Luther King Campaign for Economic Justice, and as a member of this campaign I have engaged in a number of political actions. Additionally, I have lived at Open Door for approximately five weeks during the past year as a full time participant observer, and ultimately have spent over a thousand hours either at Open Door or engaged in Open Door activities during the past year. While participating in Open Door actions I have risked arrest on a number of occasions, addressed City Council members, preached for the first time, and on a more personal level, had my heart broken by being witness to the devastating effects of poverty and homelessness.

II. Eucharist and the Breakfast Table

Within the walls of 910, a spirituality of the body and a spirituality of the heart unfold in the practice of hospitality. There is a ritual in the sharing of food and in the washing and bandaging of feet. On Mondays and Tuesdays breakfast is served to around 120 residents of the Atlanta streets. Wednesdays and Thursdays are marked by the serving of lunch and the offering of showers to those who have no showers or kitchens. On Thursday evenings, nurses, accountants, architects, and clergy, all serving as volunteers, wash and bandage tired and bloodied feet, while volunteers from Emory's School of Medicine staff a medical clinic. Sunday afternoon the dining area opens again for worship and a modest dinner of soup and bread after worship.

Breakfast begins on Monday and Tuesday mornings around 3:00 a.m. when longtime resident Ira prepares the gallons of coffee that will be taken out into the yard to be consumed by those who sometimes wait two hours for breakfast. Around 4:00 a.m. a non-resident volunteer begins preparing vast industrial cooking pots of grits, trays of turkey sausage, and dozens upon dozens of eggs. The other volunteers begin to trickle in between 5:30 and 6:00 a.m. Tickets for breakfast, always free of course, are given out in the yard between 5:30 and 6:00 the morning of breakfast, and then again around 6:50 until about 7:00 a.m. Tickets are given out to maintain a sense of order and to keep track of how many people are being served as the dining room can only comfortably accommodate 36 guests at any given time. Typically breakfast is served between 7:00 and 8:00, with the last person leaving the sorting room around 8:30.

It is no coincidence that the breakfast and lunch tables and the feet washings occur in the same space as Sunday worship; these things are not matters of convenience but extensions of worship. Such actions function to maintain the sacredness of the space. For the people at Open Door the dining room is a holy place. In the words of Open Door partner Nelia Kimborough:

> Food is the extension of the Eucharist table so that every time we share and prepare food it is an extension of the Eucharist table. … Something different comes out of us as a community and there is an extension of the Eucharist table and an opening up and expanding of the table. Often people who come in from outside remark that something different is happening here, something they've never experienced before.[5]

Perhaps the newness comes in the form of hospitality, or perhaps it is in creating sacred space in the typically profane space of a dining room. At Open Door, hospitality is practiced in an intentional manner and otherwise mundane activities become acts of resistance to social stratification and racial boundaries, and resistance itself becomes a form of worship. Hospitality becomes an act of resistance through the subversion of the social order, and the social order is subverted by the simple act of people breaking bread together who otherwise would never share a meal. The social order is subverted when the housed and wealthy serve the homeless and destitute. Moreover, this subversion is a holy act, a form of worship, because to share in such a meal is to engage in the economy of God; it is an attempt to realize the beloved community.

The image of the beloved community is foundational to Open Door's belief system. The concept is taken from the writings of Martin Luther King, who in turn,

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[5] Interview with Nelia Kimbrough, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 12, 2007).

inherited the concept from the American theologian and philosopher Josiah Royce.[6] King's, and in turn, Open Door's beloved community, is the community of God made manifest when people cross social boundaries, racial boundaries, and economic boundaries to come together in community to serve and love one another. Indeed, the realization of the beloved community would be an indication that those boundaries of separation have been replaced by bonds of unity. The beloved community will be the fruit of nonviolence, and moreover, the beloved community can only be brought about through love, deep soul love. To bring about the beloved community one must love as God loves, without qualification and fully embracing those who would kill you. Those seeking the beloved community realize that their vision is not practical; but the practical response of striking back against those who harm you, of meeting evil with evil, is simply untenable if we are ever to realize the beloved community. As King explains:

> My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. … For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way. … With every ounce of our energy we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation. But we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege and obligation to love. While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community. … Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. … beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win *you* in the process and our victory will be a double victory.'[7]

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[6] *See*, The Beloved Community of Martin Luther King, Jr. www.thekingcenter.org/prog/bc/.
[7]Martin Luther King, Strength to Love 56 (First Fortress Press ed., Fortress Press 1981) (1963).

Open Door's constant struggle to close the distance between themselves and those in the margins, and their utter rejection of the violence of the system, is done in furtherance of the beloved community. The creation of another life together through love is an impractical and seemingly impossible task, but it is the way they choose to proceed.

Breakfast at Open Door has a sacramental quality and is undertaken as a religious practice, not a social service. Accordingly, the liturgy of the morning begins the hour before breakfast between 6:00 and 6:50 and is a time of Biblical study, reflection, and prayer. Those who are attracted to Open Door for purely political reasons often do not continue their volunteer efforts; the total immersion in the language of religion is often too much for a nonbeliever. Despite their liberalism, a way of being that too often today is thought of as being irreligious, the partners of Open Door have a Protestant command of the Bible that is second to none. Life at Open Door is punctuated with Bible study throughout the week and prayer throughout the day.

The circle of breakfast volunteers is made up of homeless men and women, white collar professionals, students, retirees, and resident community members. With the exception of persons volunteering from the yard and some community residents, the majority of volunteers are white and well educated. They are the beneficiaries of an economic system vehemently denounced during the reflections, sermons, and discussions at Open Door. When Matthew Chapter three is studied during the breakfast reflection, John the Baptist is revered as a revolutionary in the wilderness preaching a message of liberation to the marginalized. John is an outlaw. The message is clear: the only way to be God's man in an unjust society is to exist outside of society; and Jesus, who is to

become an outlaw, comes as a disciple of John. The wild honey of John's sustenance is the "sweet taste of liberation."

What do the affluent professionals in the breakfast circle think when the message of Jesus is discussed as a radical and dangerous promise to the poor and the oppressed? Are they ready to redistribute their wealth and share authority with the comparatively ignorant and ill educated? Do they worship an undomesticated God who demands justice and holds a preferential option for the poor? All are themes of liberation preached and discussed routinely at Open Door. These questions are answered when volunteers and residents gather for breakfast and reflection after serving the homeless. All indications are that, while outside volunteers may recognize the brokenness of the system and acknowledge that they are beneficiaries of it, they do not identify themselves as part of the problem. How can one pray for justice while ensuring the mechanisms of injustice continue to function? Yet, there are no looks of awkwardness from the economically privileged, those who are situated firmly within the system; they do not appear to be skeptical of or embarrassed by the radicalized message of the gospel offered during the breakfast circle. They naturally and unreservedly join hands in prayer with hands that hours before may have been holding a crack pipe, a knife, a scrap of garbage, or a dirty blanket under a highway overpass. Such an atmosphere creates an unsettling dynamic in the breakfast circle at times. But that too is part of the message of Open Door. The circle is a reflection of the broader society, and the dynamics of that society are themselves queer and unsettling. It has been said often at Open Door, that as a Christian, one gives up the right to be comfortable.

When the reflection is over, people who have been waiting in the yard file in like participants at communion. First, upon entering the house, each person receives juice and a vitamin. They then enter the dining room/sanctuary where they receive a bowl containing two hard boiled eggs and three links of turkey sausage. One might expect the person handing out the bowl of eggs and sausage to pass it to the next person in line while saying "body of Christ"— and of course the appropriate response of "Amen" would follow. At the table, breakfast is served family style with heaping bowls of grits that are constantly replenished throughout the morning—along with bottomless baskets of whole wheat and whole grain breads. The people who come to Open Door for breakfast are never rushed and may sit at the table as long as they like and eat until they are full.[8] In the words of Open Door founder Eduard Loring, "Justice is important but supper [breakfast] is essential."

The residents of Open Door are very clear about the fact that they are committed to living intentionally in furtherance of realizing the beloved community. And breakfast, a key practice in that effort, is served with a clear focus on sharing food as a spiritual practice. By sharing food with those who have no food, and by sharing their home with those who have no home, the people at breakfast, both the servers and the served, are engaged in a living liturgy that at its core truly sustains and restores life equally to those who are manifestly broken and those who are sacramental celebrants. As explained to me by one Open Door partner:

> There are many liturgical elements built around the sharing of food at the table. It is an extension of the Eucharist because at the Eucharist table we

[8]Interview with Nelia Kimbrough, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 12, 2007).

> are spiritually nourished by the bread and the cup, and out of that we are called to be nourishment to the rest of the world. Eucharist as exemplified by a great banquet so that it feels like anytime we break bread it is possible to do that as an understanding of sacrament. We often say that this is an extension of our Eucharist table when we prepare to serve.[9]

Thus, at its foundation Eucharist is the sharing of food and "everything we have done starts with the sharing of food and everything with meaning has to do with being at the table, that's where community happens. For Jesus and for us it matters who you eat with."[10] Accordingly, Eucharist at the altar of Sunday worship, at breakfast, and at lunch, is the means by which the community is constantly reformed and renewed. In particular, that renewal comes through the service of the outcast and the closing of distance as the housed and un-housed feed each other at the breakfast table. In no small way I suppose it is salvation through grits and coffee, a Eucharist of daily life in the Christ-haunted south.

During every breakfast one can witness extremely ill and sometimes even dying men and women who are barely coherent; men and women who sometimes have not eaten a real meal in days; people for whom this simple breakfast of eggs and grits restores life and give fleeting measures of hope to the hopeless. I have been called an "angel" a hundred times and once watched a very tough street-wise man cry because I hugged him. He explained: "I know I smell bad and don't nobody want to see you when you on the street, much less touch you, but you do. Ain't nobody touched me that wadn't mad in a real long time." It is the presence of intense relief that is most palpable in the dining

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[9] Interview with Nelia Kimbrough, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 12, 2007).
[10] Interview with Murphy Davis, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 25, 2007).

room early in the morning. Most often, the poor and the damned return love for love. This is the Eucharist of the breakfast table.

Conversely, while a bowl of grits may bring a smile and give some modicum of hope, it may also bring a curse and angry tears, for not all who enter the dining room have come seeking the beloved community. It is sometimes clear that while Open Door residents are striving to live the gospel, the vehicles through which they most often live the gospel, i.e., the homeless, are striving simply to live. Sometimes the effort to close the gap and reduce the distance is met with an angry "fuck you" and a snatching of the bowl from a volunteers' hands. At other times an offer to help may be met with the response "I don't need your help bitch" or "leave me alone you white cunt" or even "you ain't no Christians, you're the antichrist!" Open Door volunteers not infrequently bear the brunt of anger and pain which come from the humiliation and resentment of being in a position of having to forage and beg to live.

There are sometimes other tensions and strains at the beloved community's breakfast table. Open Door can be a trope for well intended, well educated, liberal white folk who are attempting to help ill educated, poor black folk. Despite the goal of liberation, there remains the ever-present power dynamic of needy black (and white) folk having to go to the whites in charge.

During one breakfast a verbal disagreement broke out between an African-American man who had come in for breakfast, and another African-American man, formerly homeless, who was working as a volunteer serving breakfast. Shouts quickly erupted over whether the man from the yard could enter the kitchen in order to help himself to non-sweetened coffee. The senior volunteer in the dining room at the time was

a strong, beautiful, African-American woman. Normal protocol would have been for someone to go to the house-duty person, who was white, to help with conflict resolution. The senior volunteer decided not to go to the house-duty person, because as she tearfully explained later, "black folk got to take care of problems between black folk." The African-American woman keenly felt the degradation of having to seek out the person in charge, a white woman, to resolve a minor dispute between two adult African-American males, and she refused to perpetuate the unintentional humiliation of following the rules. The two men resolved the disagreement themselves, shook hands, and enjoyed breakfast. This seemingly insignificant interaction is a powerful example of the fact that, even within an environment like Open Door, standard practice sometimes reinforces societal patterns of blacks seeking help from the whites in charge. This dynamic causes intermittent tension and anger.

The work at Open Door is of a religious nature, an embracing of radical discipleship and non-violence. The response to anger is neither anger returned nor the belief that the person snatching the bowl should be grateful; it is a response of compassion and love. The members of Open Door know they cannot "fix" the anger of the dispossessed or the many problems of their friends, for such problems are endemic to the American system of militarism and capitalism. It is the system that must be changed, not individuals broken by the system:

> If we really do believe that God is present to us in the poor, then it is a given that we are against the system that hates, punishes, and crushes the poor. To serve the poor and not to confront the injustice of the system that causes poverty and oppression is ultimately to insult the poor and to denigrate the presence of God among us. It is to say that your poverty and victimization is an individual problem (i.e., your fault), so obviously the

> agenda must be to rehabilitate you, not to reform or transform a sick society. If Jesus comes to us in the poor, and we are working to rehabilitate the poor, what are we doing: trying to rehabilitate Jesus Christ?[11]

The above quote demonstrates the fact that the leadership of Open Door is cognizant of the denigration of the poor and the oppressed, and further, that to perpetuate such denigration is to punish and crush God who is present in the poor. Denigration though doesn't have to come in the obvious sledge-hammer blows of an unjust system; it can be as subtle as having to ask for help in a context where outside intervention is not required, as the above example serves to illustrate. Perhaps justice requires more than a refusal to see those broken by the system as in need of rehabilitation. Justice may require that capable people who are accustomed to being in charge to not further "insult the poor" by intervening in situations where their skills are simply not required.

Eucharist breakfast tables can be interrupted and challenged by other problems. When it is either very cold or very hot, tempers can run short out in the yard, and altercations both verbal and physical do occur. If order cannot be established through peaceful conflict resolution, then the person working the front door will simply refuse to open the door, and Open Door will remain closed until order can be established.

Sometimes the calm of the yard is disrupted not by agitation brought about by the weather, but by the screams and cries of the mentally ill. Working at Open Door one becomes quickly and painfully aware that a significant number of the homeless suffer from mental illness. During a Tuesday morning breakfast last July, an animal scream of

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[11]Murphy Davis, A Work of Hospitality, *Loving the Poor and Embracing the Radical Gospel: Matthew 25 as a Liberation Spirituality* 23 (Peter R. Gathje ed., 2002).

anguish, deep and guttural, cut through the air. One could only watch, horrified, as one of the Open Door regulars, one of the friends from the yard who is deeply mentally ill, clenched his hair in his hands while alternately reaching wildly for those around him. Eyes screwed shut; over and over again he fell to the ground while sharp jagged inhuman noises resonated from deep within his tired and diseased body. It was the moment that a human broke and was reduced to his anguish. Members of the house watched in painful silence. Life at Open Door is an ineluctable ebb and flow of pain and compassion, a place where you are guaranteed to have your heart broken if you stick around for any length of time. Yet the residents try not to grow numb to the pain by using faith and prayer:

> To experience people who are very mentally ill and violent you wonder what you can do. Sometimes there is nothing to do but pray. You cannot live this life without prayer or without frequent celebration of the Eucharist. I don't understand how anyone could do this from a secular basis because we are always failing. What we would call our 'successes' are so infrequent and so short lived; you simply can't do this on the basis of success. So we regularly pray together. When we gather as a community we gather and pray.[12]

It is the nature of society that ensures that failure is part of the reality of Open Door, not the brokenness of individuals. A Tuesday morning breakfast discussion echoed founder Murphy Davis' above-quoted essay from 1994. During the breakfast discussion it was reiterated that the belief at Open Door is that the brokenness of the homeless, the brokenness of us all, is a result of a system of domination which ensures continued separation from each other, and continued separation from God. Sin is social. The

[12] Interview with Nelia Kimbrough, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 12, 2007).

concept of sin as social shows the influence of the great American liberal theologian Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel. Just as striving for solidarity is a striving for communal solidarity, so to, is the sense of brokenness and sorrow a sense of brokenness and sorrow for the community. In discussing solidarity from the perspective of an Old Testament prophet, Rauschenbusch tells us:

> [h]is woe did not come through fear of personal damnation, but through his sense of solidarity with his people and through social feeling; his hope and comfort was not for himself alone but for his nation. This form of religious experience is more distinctly Christian than any form which is caused by fear and thinks only of itself.[13]

The members of Open Door seek not only to heal themselves, but to heal society through love. They take Dorothy Day's maxim seriously: the only solution is love. So they continue serving breakfast, they continue trying to love, they continue to fail, and they try and try again.

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[13] Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel 20 (Library of Theological Ethics ed., Westminster John Knox Press 1997) (1917).

III. The Practice of Washing Feet

If Open Door members are "Catholic" in their conception and celebration of the Eucharist, then they are "Primitive Baptist" in their commitment to washing feet. Foot washing has long been part of the liturgical practice at Open Door. As explained by Murphy, "while at Clifton our sacramental understanding was broadened to understand foot washing as sacramental. This notion came from two Mennonites and one Primitive Baptist in conjunction, who brought it to our liturgical life. Jesus said 'do this' so how much clearer could it be, also Jesus said 'do this and you will be blessed' John Chapter thirteen."[14] As a general rule of thumb, if Jesus said to "do it" as related by the Gospels, whatever "it" may be will be practiced at Open Door.

The practice of washing feet cuts to the very theological and political heart of Open Door. Every Thursday night the Harriet Tubman Foot Clinic is in operation at Open Door and the feet of society's damned are cared for. The Jesus of Open Door theology is the suffering servant. Unlike the increasingly loud din from those engaged in Christian nationalism (or the Homeland Church as Eduard Loring refers to it), you will find no Davidic kings at Open Door.[15] Jesus served the lowly. He washed their feet and he taught his disciples to serve in the same manner. And so today it is the intention of the residents and volunteers of Open Door to serve the least among us by taking the worn and bruised feet of the homeless into gentle hands that then wash and care for feet that otherwise know no comfort.

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[14] Interview with Murphy Davis, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 25, 2007). Clifton Presbyterian Church, a small Atlanta church, is where Eduard Loring served as pastor in the late 1970s prior to the founding of Open Door. At Clifton, Eduard and Murphy began their intense Bible studies with Carolyn and Rob Johnson with whom they founded Open Door in December of 1981.

[15] *See infra* p. *23.*

> Jesus … stooped and washed the dirtiest part of his students … then he instructed them to do the same for each other, and to learn the truth: that he had sent them to serve the lowly, not those who typically are served. Jesus promises happiness to his followers if they put into practice the truth that he has just taught. So there is a grace – a fitness, a blessing, a mercy granted – in the simple act of servanthood.[16]

Apart from the Thursday night foot clinic, residents and volunteers also occasionally wash each other's feet during the early morning reflection prior to breakfast, and during community retreats to Open Door's farm in north Georgia, Day Spring. But the focus in this chapter shall be on the physically dirty ritual of Thursday night foot clinic, because the spiritual and political implications of an Open Door practice stand stark at the foot clinic.

The roles taken by the participants of Thursday night foot clinic strike an initial cord of dissonance for some. During the past year at the foot clinic all of the volunteers who wash feet, with the exception of one volunteer who attended for a couple of weeks, have been white well educated females. The majority of those whose feet are washed are homeless African-American males. The dynamic is jarring and socially incoherent based upon societal norms and expectations; it simply does not accord with the social script that we have been provided with. It is not an over exaggeration to suspect that this sort of activity could have led to lynching fifty years ago in the South.

Washing the feet of the poor, just like serving food to the poor, is part of the formation of discipleship that takes place on a daily basis at Open Door. Observations reveal, however, that the majority of those receiving the foot washing and foot care do

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[16] Elizabeth Dede, A Work of Hospitality, *How Happy You Will Be!* 228 (Peter R. Gathje ed., 2002).

not understand that they are instruments of radical discipleship. In fact, first time recipients of care at the foot clinic, especially African-American men, are often bewildered and even made uncomfortable by the intimacy of the process taking place.

It is not uncommon for volunteers to receive the question from those whose feet they are washing, "why on earth are you doing this?" If the response is something to the effect that the volunteer is doing it because she enjoys it, then such a response is almost unfailingly met with a surprised look and a shaking of the head. It is not uncommon to hear recipients new to the foot clinic say "this just don't look right," or "I wouldn't never wash nobody's feet." Invariably though the strangeness wears off and people relax and enjoy themselves, even if they still look a little puzzled when they leave. Ultimately, in washing the feet of the poor, the volunteers serve and love God. "We love and serve God when we love and serve our fellows, whom he loves, and in whom he lives."[17]

The act of foot washing was a stroke of political brilliance on the part of Jesus; try maintaining a sense of superiority over someone after you have knelt in front of them and washed their feet. The act is an act of both subservience and solidarity, and it is the act of washing feet, more than any form of worship or political activity that Open Door members engage in, that most clearly illustrates the ethos of Open Door theology.

For the founders of Open Door, washing feet serves to distinguish between having "*faith in Jesus*" versus having the "*faith of Jesus*."

> The *faith of Jesus* leads one to radical discipleship and a fierce battle against capitalism, homelessness, the death penalty, and the deconstruction of literature. … Jesus in his preferential option for

[17] Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel 48 (Library of Theological Ethics ed., Westminster John Knox Press 1997) (1917).

> the poor, washes our feet and then teaches us to wash one another's feet. John 13. 14-15: 'I your leader and teacher, have just washed your feet. You, then, should wash one another's feet. I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you.' The Homeland Church cannot wash feet. Their membership would flee, their parking lots would not have a Humvee in sight. Seminaries cannot do it, for those who make a killing with footnotes refuse to wash feet. … Like John the Baptist, Jesus calls us to public acts of solidarity with the poor, slaves, the abandoned ones, prisoners, panhandlers, and street prostitutes. For as God takes on stoop labor for us, *she*, in turn, calls us to serve each other 'from the bottom up.' We are to wash each other's feet. … Without foot washing one is believing and practicing a washed-out Christianity.[18]

Thus, the washing of feet is both powerful and counter-cultural, because it is a direct action, an embracing, in fact, of an alternative way of being in the world. To have faith *in* Jesus is passive, to have the faith *of* Jesus requires action, and action is dangerous. Thoughts may be provocative, but to follow Jesus one must be provoked to the point of action. It is relatively safe to discuss solidarity as an academic concept, it is dangerous, and it is gospel, to *practice* solidarity. Washing feet physically closes the distance, and embraces the other. Mainline churches cannot close the distance, and academic institutions and seminaries cannot close the distance; to do so would be to challenge and subvert the very system that provides such institutions with financial support. You cannot be a respectable member of society while you are elbow deep in dirty, bloody water washing the poor.

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[18] Eduard Loring, *John the Baptist Misunderstanding Jesus Part One: The Feet*, Hospitality, May 2006, at 8, emphasis added.

In the Thursday night foot clinic the residents of Open Door have created a reflection of the beloved community. The theology of Open Door teaches that one of the hallmarks of the beloved community is that people who are not supposed to be together by societal standards— i.e., "this just don't look right,"— come together in community. Again, we are reminded that the beloved community is not reasonable and it is not efficient. The beloved community must practice what King called a "disinterested love," agape. Agape is active love, not passive; an expression of agapic love is an example of having the faith *of* Jesus. "*Agape* is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. *Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community … *Agape* is the willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality."[19] In other words: "the things done by members [of the Beloved Community] don't make any sense by the world's standards. To be part of the Beloved Community means to live in such a way that your life would not make sense if God did not exist (Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard)."[20]

There is a reality to the foot clinic, however, that deserves further analysis. Those who actually engage in the care and washing of feet at the foot clinic on Thursday nights are outside volunteers. Residents of the household attend foot clinic on a regular basis, but it is in the capacity of having their feet cared for, not in the capacity of one rendering care. The foot clinic functions much as the breakfasts and lunches function, that is, as an opportunity to bring non-resident volunteers into the community to work with the homeless, and in that respect it serves as a form of evangelism. Bringing members of the broader community together who would not otherwise interact (i.e., well educated young white women and homeless African –Americans), feet washing jumbles their social

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[19] Martin Luther King, Stride Toward Freedom 105 (Harper Collins Publishers 1986) (1958).
[20] Meridith Owensby, *Off the Deep End in the Beloved Community*, Hospitality, October, 2005 at 10.

statuses and roles. This is Open Door theology in practice. This is part of the liberation mission of Open Door. In subverting the orders of society by serving the lowly, those who serve are also liberated; and, in part, that liberation occurs through hearing the stories of the poor. Communication and proximity can lead to solidarity, and solidarity functions as a means of conversion. Through this liberation, the servant and the served are freed to experience the gospel. As the great liberation theologian of Latin America Gustavo Gutierrez explains:

> Participation in the process of liberation is an obligatory and privileged *locus* for Christian life and reflection. In this participation will be heard nuances of the Word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations and without which there can be no authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord.[21]

Thus, serving the poor, and listening to the poor, becomes a means by which one serves and hears God.

But not all of the residents of Open Door are comfortable with following the example of the servant messiah so closely. Ironically, *some* residents who were once themselves homeless refuse to volunteer at Thursday night foot clinic. "Paul," a former resident of Open Door who was homeless prior to moving in to Open Door, explained: "it's good and all that you take care of peoples' feet, but I ain't doing it." Another resident of Open Door who was also formerly homeless was more specific in his objections. When asked why he did not volunteer at the foot clinic, he said: "I'm not touching their nasty feet." This raises the issue of whether the theology of open Door trickles down to the entire community. Does it trickle down or does it primarily begin and end with the leadership team? The rate of attrition is high at Open Door for those

[21] Gustavo Gutierrez , A Theology of Liberation 32 (15th Anniversary Edition., Orbis Books 1988) (1971).

coming in off the streets. For some, Open Door is no more than a shelter with "really good food and lots of praying." But for a number of formerly homeless people, Open Door is home, and not just a half-way place between the streets and the next stop. Still, that does not mean that the theology of home is internalized in all of the residents. After mentioning that he first came to "know Ed and Murphy when they was practicing Liberation Theology over at Clifton," a long time resident was asked if the practice of Liberation Theology was important to him. He responded candidly, "to tell you the truth I didn't know what Liberation theology was back then, I don't know what it is now, and I don't care."

It is not clear that the majority of those who come to live in the house from the streets are theologically invested in the leadership team's conception of Jesus' project of social justice. This does not prevent them, however, from engaging in public political actions, nor does it prevent them from serving the poor at breakfast and lunch; they do both. It appears, though, that some of the formerly homeless residents of Open Door approach Open Door practices as a job rather than as a religious mandate. Then again, perhaps it is easier for those who have always been served to then become the servants for a higher purpose. If a person has had to struggle against racism and/or poverty for their entire life, and if they have had to fight for even the smallest amount of respect, then perhaps it is understandable if she or he is not eager to divest themselves of the new-found dignity that begins to accrue when one finally has a home.

IV. The Spiritual as Political: Spiritual Politics and the Challenging of Empire

By now it should be clear that the residents of Open Door view the American system in biblical terms. The U.S. government and corporate America is viewed as "empire," and Open Door residents are determined to challenge empire and refuse the pinch of incense. The political actions analyzed in this chapter will illustrate that, for the residents of Open Door, it is not enough to simply engage in the works of mercy; one must also directly challenge injustice, oppression, and all forms of apartheid. This is so because the Jesus of Open Door theology, along with his identity as a suffering servant, also is a subversive who both preaches and breaks the law. Open Door theological teachers include "William Stringfellow, Dorothy Day, Jacques Ellul, Clarence Jordan, Jeff Dietrich, Elsa Tamez, Ched Myers, Dan Berrigan, Pete Gathje, and Warren Carter, among others."[22] These theologians which have strongly influenced the beliefs and practices of the Open Door Community, are all theologians and activist who ascribed, or ascribe, to the view that God has a preferential option for the poor and oppressed of society. Ched Myers' commentary on Mark, Binding the Strong Man , captures this aspect of the Jesus of Open Door:

> From the moment he strides into a Capernaum synagogue, it becomes clear that Jesus' kingdom project is incompatible with the local public authorities and the social order they represent. … He brings wholeness and liberation to the poor, and receives hospitality from the socially outcast, with whom his solidarity lies. The risk of provoking official hostility does not deter Jesus from pressing his criticism of every social code that serves to institutionalize alienation. Then to dramatize his opposition, Jesus publicly breaks the law. It is at that point that the

[22] Eduard Loring, *Agitator*, Hospitality, January 2007, at 10.

authorities determine that he must be neutralized.[23]

The spiritual is political when one reads the Bible as a promise of liberation and a manifesto for social justice. In this chapter I will analyze the political beliefs of the community, with a focus on the politics of certain community founders.

The Open Door liturgical year contains a number of opportunities for the residents to engage in pubic actions in order to serve as witnesses to the larger community of Atlanta. One such opportunity that I will analyze is Holy Week with the Homeless, a week-long event that takes place between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday on the streets of Atlanta, a ritual that combines liturgy with political action. I will also analyze another Open Door tradition, the celebration of the Festival of Shelters which occurs every October in Woodruff Park. Finally, I will discuss "agitation theology," which is Open Door theology put into practice in the wider community, and I will explore a manifestation of that theology in a recent protest of Atlanta's anti-panhandling ordinance. It is the combination of radical theology and direct actions that have led me to term Open Door practice as Liberation Gospel and this chapter will end with a reflection upon the meaning of this characterization.

Let me begin, though, by saying a general word about theological currents that have influenced this community. The turmoil of the 1960's left its mark on baby-boomers in almost as many ways as there are baby-boomers, but for the founders of Open Door the 1960's served as a crucible in which lifetime radicals were formed. Cofounder Eduard Loring, whose influence upon the ethos and telos of Open Door can not be understated even today, is a good example. He was deeply effected by Martin Luther

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[23] Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man 137 (Orbis Books 2006).

King, whom he conceives of as a practitioner of undomesticated Christian discipleship. On the day King was assassinated Loring made a promise to God and to King to henceforth lead a life of radical discipleship in furtherance of the beloved community.[24] It is a promise Loring has kept. One may wonder why today's Christians are so pedestrian if Jesus was such a radical subversive, and why King is revered by a social order he reviled. The clear answer to residents of Open Door is simple: domestication. One cannot make a radical message more palatable to the masses because the minute one does the message is destroyed:

> King's acceptance by mainline institutions for marketing purposes has dulled the cutting edge for justice. There is a soft backlash. To domesticate a radical is the aim of the mainline in the same way a backlash wants to undue affirmative action. You can't legislate against King, or dismiss him, so you domesticate King. Culture, marketing and fashion serve as tools for domestication. The message of King is a message of radical engagement so the moment it becomes palatable to the non-radical it is no longer the message. Likewise, Jesus without agony and persecution is a false message. The word as perverted equals domestication, lies, falsification, propaganda, mind control. We are at war over the authenticity of the life and message of Jesus Christ. Radical discipleship is the primary and fundamental truth of Jesus Christ and the radical Dr. King.[25]

King admonished Christian's to reject conformity, and that admonishment echoes as a precursor to Loring's own diatribe against domestication:

> [W]e as Christians have a mandate to be nonconformists. …We are called to be people of conviction, not of conformity; of moral nobility, not social

[24] Interview with Eduard Loring, Partner, Open Door Community (July 12, 2006).
[25]Interview with Eduard Loring, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 5, 2007).

> respectability. We are commanded to live differently and according to a higher loyalty. … in any cause that concerns the progress of mankind, put your faith in the nonconformist![26]

Ironically, like those of the far Christian right who regard Christianity as political and conceive of themselves as engaged in a cultural war, Loring's Christology is also unabashedly political and also at odds with popular culture. The differences in ideology and content, however, could not be starker. Open Door's Jesus is all inclusive and specifically brings good news to the poor. Open Door's Jesus is a practitioner of non-violence and believes in social justice for all and a responsibility to one's neighbor. And ultimately, Open Door's Jesus looks toward a Socialist style communitarian existence in the beloved community. If one contrasts the liberal inclusive Christianity of Open Door with the conservative Christianity of a political right that rejects homosexuality, inclusiveness, and certainly Socialism, it becomes clear that multiple Christianities, barely resembling each other, are being practiced, and that these Christianities have little to say to each other.

In addition to Martin Luther King, Liberation Theology has exerted a strong influence upon the theology and practices of Open Door, an influence that manifests in the language employed and in the forms of community praxis. Along with the South and Central American Liberation Theology of theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, the North American Liberation Theology of James Cone has also been instrumental in the formation of Open Door theology and praxis. Let us take a moment to consider

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[26] Martin Luther King, Strength to Love 21-22, 26 (First Fortress Press ed., Fortress Press 1981) (1963).

Liberation Theology, and in what way it has influenced Open Door's beliefs and practices.

The influence of Liberation Theology is seen in the community's strict adherence to the belief that God possesses a preferential option for the poor. Because of this option Christians must commit to the poor through the works of mercy, and through loving the poor as God loves the poor. According to Gutierrez: "[t]he commitment to the poor is not 'optional' in the sense that a Christian is free to make or not this option, or commitment, to the poor, just as the love we owe to all human beings without exception is not 'optional.' "[27] For those who practice Liberation Theology, the commitment to building a just society is a commitment to salvation. The Christian God demands social justice, and because the church exists within the world, it is in this world that the Christian must strive for justice. God is present and historical. The Kingdom of God is present in the ghettos, and liberation is not to be achieved only in death. "The building of a just society has worth in terms of the Kingdom, … to participate in the process of liberation is already, in a certain sense, a salvific work."[28]

The vision of Liberation Theology shares much with King's conception of the beloved community, and Open Door draws deeply from both. The commitment to liberation is a commitment to God's vision; it is an act of faithfulness and a commitment to a new way of living. Beyond the economic, and the political, the commitment to liberation means

> in a deeper sense, to see the becoming of humankind as a process of human emancipation in history. It is to see humanity in search of a qualitatively different society in which it will be free from all servitude,

[27] Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation xxvi (15th Anniversary Edition., Orbis Books 1988) (1971).
[28] *Id.* at 46.

> in which it will be the artisan of its own destiny. It is to seek the building up of *a new humanity*.[29]

The inclusion of feminist theology in Open Door's quilt of theological influence is yet another thing that separates Open Door from other Catholic Worker houses. From the outset, the partners of Open Door were committed to the use of inclusive language, and female ministers have always held positions of leadership at Open Door. Murphy Davis explains from a historical perspective in the life of the community the importance of the combined role of liberation theology and feminism thusly:

> Liberation Theology was also fundamental in our formation: Segundo, Gutierrez, Boff, and the belief in God's preferential option for the poor. This combined with the South American revolutions in the late 70's act as one influence. Our lives were also changed by Bible study at Clifton as we began to grapple with scripture in a way that we had not before. We began to study theology from the base. James Cone and the self conscious black liberation theology have been very important to us as well, as has feminist theology. You know that's actually one area that really distinguishes us as well, our identity clearly as a feminist movement. The role of gender goes back to my experience in seminary and Ed's experience as seminary faculty. When I was in seminary in the early 70's there were four women in my class and at Columbia and that was the first time that there was a real number of women on the ministerial track. From the very beginning inclusive language has been significant for us. On the first day of orientation I received a folder that read "Columbia Seminary, preparing men for ministry." I was not any more included in the language of the theology classes. Back in the 70's I thought that once we got through this language issue a lot would be settled. I can not believe it today when I go into mainline churches, even with women

[29] Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation 56 (15th Anniversary Edition., Orbis Books 1988) (1971).

> serving as pastors, every bit of God language is still "Father" and gender exclusive. We don't tolerate it here or in our newspaper. We do not permit anything insulting or exclusive be it race, class, or gender orientation.[30]

It is standard practice at Open Door to refer to God in the feminine, and during scripture readings the masculine pronoun is not used. In addition to referring to God as both Mother and Father and the use of feminine pronouns, more formal names of God are also utilized on a regular basis such as: Yahweh-Elohim, Adonai, and Jehovah. While the Christian God may be the God of Abraham and Jacob, at Open Door one never forgets that the Christian God is also the God of Sara and Rachel.

The practice of non-violence is an area where Open Door is similar to other Catholic Worker houses, and when the Iraq war began *Hospitality* published Dorothy Day's famous Catholic Worker proclamation "We are Still Pacifists," first published in the New York *Catholic Worker*. Here Day affirmed: "We are still pacifists. Our manifesto is the Sermon on the Mount, which means that we will try to be peacemakers. Speaking for many of our conscientious objectors, we will not participate in armed warfare or in making munitions, or by buying government bonds to prosecute the war, or in urging others to these efforts."[31] Despite the commitment to non-violence, the residents of Open Door could not properly be called pacifists in the far left sense and some do not employ the term; however, as a means of identification with the broader

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[30] Interview with Murphy Davis, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 25, 2007).

[31] Dorothy Day, *Our Country Passes From Undeclared War to Declared War; We Continue Our Christian Pacifist Stand*, The Catholic Worker, Jan. 1942, at 1,4. http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=868&SearchTerm=we%20are%20still%20pacifists

Catholic Worker movement the term pacifist is sometimes used.[32] Although they reject the outright physical violence that Liberation Theology will at times countenance, Open Door members do not reject coercion as a means of achieving their ends. Loring explains:

> [O]btaining power for the powerless requires coercion. Those with power never give it up voluntarily, and therefore non-violent coercion, is appropriate and necessary. King understood Jesus' position on non-violence but saw Gandhi loving the enemy while also forcing them out of India. Far left pacifist think that any form of coercion is wrong. … Gandhi brought something new to the West so that now we do civil disobedience in order to try and get laws changed. Non violence thus becomes a tool for powerless people. For Christians, means and ends are the same and non violence is not a tool but a way of life. Some would say that there is no difference between coercion and violence, I reject that. This is something we need to keep talking about. A radical Jesus movement means assertive non violent action rooted in respect for the personhood of adversary. King never used "pacifism" to describe his movement.[33]

Loring's, and by extension Open Door's, willingness to engage in coercion also stems in part from the recognition that conflict is a fundamental part of human existence. The story of the gospel is a story of conflict, and for the Open Door Community a powerful reoccurring theme of the gospel is Jesus constantly coming into conflict with the powers and principalities of both the Jewish and Roman establishments. Conflict is endemic to our very nature and an attempt to try and avoid all conflict is an attempt to avoid reality, a position soundly rejected by members of the community:

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[32] Interview with Eduard Loring, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 5, 2007).
[33] *Id.*

> Fundamental to human existence is conflict and to talk about non-coercion is ahistorical. God comes into human history in suffering. The soul is engaged in political and biological conflict so to talk about no coercion is to talk like Quakers who believe that people are essentially good. We are essentially good and evil. But one must be careful not to become Manichean here. There is nothing more deceitful than the human heart (Jeremiah), but also nothing more joyful. We are light and dark, trustworthy and liars, right and wrong. Grace, redemption, and salvation do not mean an absence of conflict within the self. The optimum of human struggle, to be mature and fulfilled is the mitigation of the power of death. But never will we overcome sin and death and evil. However, justice is a historical possibility, redemption is a historical possibility. But to have as your goal a non-flawed system, however, is impossible, stupid, immature, and distracting from the real possibilities. The fundamental position of the human condition is tragedy.[34]

Thus, conflict is embraced as fundamental and unavoidable. To avoid conflict would be to refuse to take up the cross and such a refusal is fundamentally incompatible with radical discipleship.

One explanation for Open Door's longevity is their insistence upon seeing their social and spiritual context realistically. Contrary to what one may expect from an intentional Christian community dedicated to social justice, the Bible is not an opiate for the members; nor do Open Door organizers proceed under the delusions of an ideal theory. The members of Open Door are engaged in Jesus' project of working to realize the beloved community not because they ever expect to see it in any sustained sense, but for the deontological reason that it is simply the right thing to do. God calls them to

[34] Interview with Eduard Loring, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 5, 2007).

practice the works of mercy, live the Sermon on the Mount, and challenge empire in a prophetic manner; therefore, they practice the works of mercy, try to live the Sermon on the Mount, and act as screaming prophets in an urban wilderness.

A. Holy Week on the Streets

One of the most important and unique traditions of Open Door's liturgical year is Holy Week on the streets of Atlanta, during which time residents and volunteers spend a twenty-four-hour period walking the Atlanta streets, visiting various shelters and soup kitchens throughout the city. The Holy Week practice is a spirituality of the body; an ascetic practice of ritual condition. The ritual of Holy Week is done in imitation and remembrance of the final week of Jesus' life. As Jesus intentionally turned toward Jerusalem and embraced a conflict that would lead to his execution, so to do the observers of Holy Week turn toward the City and embrace the conflict that the poor and homeless are met with on a daily basis, a conflict that leads to the death/crucifixion of an untold number of homeless persons each year.

It is through this Holy Week observance that the residents and volunteers fulfill one of the objectives of Open Door: to serve as a living witness. "One of the roles of Open Door in Atlanta is that we are a confessing discipleship community, and because our life and witness is public it is there for Atlantans to know and see."[35] Holy Week also reflects the fact that "street time" is an integral part of Open Door's praxis. You cannot experience solidarity with the poor if you are always waiting for the poor to come to you. In such a practice one is simply another service provider, and, as has been noted repeatedly, Open Door intentionally avoids being a social service provider. "Open Door

[35] Interview with Eduard Loring, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 5, 2007).

Community hopes, prays, and struggles in its community life to offer an alternative rooted in the experience of abundant life in an environment of scarcity and death."[36] For Open Door even to begin to approach community authentically, the sense of community must flow both ways through the doors of Open Door.

> The streets have enormous gifts to give, but exact a high cost to both the body and the soul. In the American context it is nigh unto impossible to find the God of The Other Way, The Other Truth, and The Other Life without hitting the streets that run like veins and arteries coiling in the belly of the beast who shines on one street with glitter and chrome and on the next with steel bars and battered prostitutes. … the street is where God is living and dying. She wants us to join her, come to the streets. There, to bring the word of God, which continues the Word of salvation and justice for many.[37]

Members of Open Door reject the notion that society can be changed through the vehicle of internal transformation alone, thus one must enter into external conflict. In Loring's words, "[w]e in the West have lost the capacity for fundamental change from the inside. It can be imagined by the poets but no redemptive myth is operative in our society that would allow for radical change."[38]

The observance of Holy Week with the Homeless is a surreal combination of liturgy, street education, protest, and guerilla theatre. It is like a Mass taken out of the physical boundaries of a church and transplanted to secular sites throughout the city. Grady Memorial Hospital, Woodruff Park, the City Jail, City Hall, the State Capital, the Peachtree and Pine shelter—all become sacred space, all become symbolic Stations of the

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[36] *Id.*
[37] Eduard Loring, *On the Street One More Time Again*, Hospitality, May 2005, at 6.
[38] *Id.*

Cross. Open Door members see places such as the jail, City Hall, and the State Capital as places where the poor fall and are crucified. Grady Hospital, on the other hand, is a holy place because it is a place of resurrection and salvation for so many of the City's homeless and working poor. Grady Hospital serves the poor and homeless of both Fulton and Dekalb counties. Yet like many holy places, Grady is a place of tension. It is a place of tension because although it is a place of life for the poor, it is also a place where the impoverished are crowded together, pharmacy lines are impossibly long, and much needed care is chronically under-funded. The members of Open Door believe that the biblical world is tangible at Grady, and for that reason most of the groups that go out for Holy Week make a visit to Grady as part of their pilgrimage.

> Grady, a place where anyone can see the humiliation of the poor and hear the cry of God's compassion in the groans of those who suffer: the pharmacy Line. Here the biblical world shines clearly like a silver spring morning. No need to bring the Bible into the modern world. Rather, we move from the security of modernity, with all its crucifixions and resistance to the powers, into the world in which Jesus and his followers lived. Here, under the eye of the police, stands a bent-over widow whose mite is not enough for her meds.[39]

Each day during Holy Week members and volunteers gather at 5:00 p.m. at one of the aforementioned locations. In Open Door terminology, the locations are "listening posts & seeing sights" which are "places in the city where the Holy Spirit has guided us over the years. These are places where we meet with the homeless poor as well as the over-housed. We often do Bible study, proclamation and prayer on the streets at these Holy Spirit-filled places."[40] When participants of Holy Week meet at these listening

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[39] Eduard Loring, *On the Street One More Time Again*, Hospitality, May 2005, at 7.
[40] *Id.* at 6.

posts and seeing sights, the locations are turned into sites of worship where prayer and reflection commence. As part of the service, Eucharist is celebrated on the steps of City Hall, in Woodruff Park, or where-ever the larger group is meeting. This Eucharist is not a symbolic Eucharist, it is an actual breaking of bread and sharing of wine (grape juice actually, as a number of Open Door residents are recovering alcoholics). The worship then concludes with another group of residents and volunteers being sent off in prayer, out into the streets for twenty-four-hours until they meet up with the larger group again at the next location on the following day.

One group's experience during Holy Week on the Streets began at 5:00 p.m. on Palm Sunday, April 9, 2006 and lasted until the group of four met up with the larger Open Door community at 5:00 p.m. on April 10 outside of Grady Memorial Hospital. The group was the first to go out, and it was comprised of three Caucasian women, one in her early 20's and two in their early 30's, and Eduard Loring, A Caucasian male, and still an imposing figure in his early 60's.

Each group during Holy Week has one or two leaders who have previously participated in Holy Week on the Streets and know the city well. Each leader has his or her own style, and seeks to explore the streets in their own way. Being on the streets with Loring means being in an almost constant state of motion, stopping only to visit and pray with the persecuted and homeless, or to read and reflect on biblical passages concerning Jesus' ministry during the last week of his life.

The group left Open Door and proceeded west down Ponce toward Boulevard, a drug infested area of the city. The first stop was at a site called "Catch-out Corner," so termed by the homeless who wait there each day for work. Catch-out Corner is located in

front of a large shopping center, and each day during the early morning hours a labor pool forms. There were a few men milling about in the cool of the early evening, and a member of the group asked them if they had seen Jesus. They assured the group that they had not, and after a few minutes of friendly banter the group proceeded on. Thus went the rest of the evening. The group was a strange looking bunch that attracted no small amount of attention as they roamed through neighborhoods in the middle of the night, neighborhoods that most of their peers wouldn't dare to enter under the full light of day. The women of the group tucked their hair up under skull caps and went out without a trace of make-up in an effort to avoid drawing attention to the fact that they were three women alone but for the company of one male. Many times throughout the night as the group ranged and roamed over the city they were asked, sometimes in aggressive tones, "What are ya'll doing around here?" Most often the response was "We're looking for Jesus, have you seen him?" Members of the group were called "crazy mother fuckers" more than once, and no doubt the perception that they were not sane had a hand in keeping them safe.

Just as often as they were met with shaking heads and aspersions of insanity, the question of "have you seen Jesus, we're out here looking for him?" was met with careful consideration and thoughtful response in either the negative or the affirmative. Yes, in fact, some had seen him. J.C. himself had been spotted under a bridge earlier, or walking down the street, or maybe waiting to get into a shelter for the night. Time and time again conversations that were started with people on the street ended in their request for prayer. It was striking how often the name of Jesus proceeded from the mouths of the poor, and how ready the street people were to talk of and pray to this suffering messiah. It was also

surprising how many ostensibly hopeless and homeless people wanted to offer prayers for the four pilgrims winding their way through the city that night. A crippled woman who was bedded down under a bridge for the night with her wheel-chair beside her insisted that God was good to her and it was the group who were in need of her prayers.

At times the group walked in silence, and at times deep in conversation. Sometimes instead of asking if someone had seen Jesus, one or the entire group simply screamed for him: "Jesus, where are you?!" In the middle of that very long night downtown churches stood stark, all ringed by an iron fences, fences to keep out the homeless, the beggars, the panhandlers, the prostitutes, the foul and dying ones. The God of wealthy Atlanta wants clean healthy people to sing his praises—after all, "the poor will always be with us." Hands wrapped around the cold iron fence surrounding a large Episcopalian church with wide sweeping lawns, the group screamed with all of its might to be let in. The cold unmovable unresponsive church did not even blink. Jesus would not be found there, and so the pilgrims continued up Peachtree to Pine Street and the infamous Peachtree and Pine shelter.

The Peachtree and Pine shelter is located in a worn fortress of a warehouse in a dangerous crack-infested neighborhood. It is a shelter of last resort, yet it is always full. The group spoke with the guards working the door and attempted to find out as much as possible about the inner workings of the shelter. Numerous men and a few women were scattered around the doorways, too late to get inside and with nowhere else to go. The skull caps and lack of make-up were ineffective, and three young white women attracted a fair amount of attention.

The night had turned cold and the group stood silent, reflecting on everything they had seen. The bracing air soon carried the sound of someone screaming, screaming in anger and slowly coming closer. In another minute a woman pulling a suitcase with wheels crested the top of the hill and proceeded to walk and sway down the middle of the street. Her voice was clear and angry, and her speech littered with profanity, yet her core message seemed to be about God. She was calling down the wrath of God upon everyone within the sound of her voice; damning everyone within her purview and the entire City of Atlanta. This surreal vision of a prophet was stunning and one of the women said in a low voice, full of wonder, "My God it's John the Baptist."

Across the street from the shelter was a mostly abandoned parking lot. Large rats scurried to and fro under what few cars were there, while negotiations for sex and crack took place all around. The strange little band walked to the middle of the lot, and, checking for needles, sat down. How strange to find one's self sitting in a parking lot in the middle of a cold night, watching rats and drug dealers, and talking about Jesus, the oppression of the poor and the destructive nature of a system that feeds off human misery. Off and on people approached. Some thought the band of pilgrims were undercover police at first, but most decided they were harmless and left them alone. In time, the group was joined by a homeless family who had overheard the group praying and wanted to join them in prayer. After spending some time with the family, the group decided that it was time to move along.

All through the night, the city witnessed to the message preached so often at Open Door. The message was that the poor were being ground under the heels of capitalism, and that those who could not contribute to the maintenance of empire were swept away

like garbage into human landfills, under bridges, and tucked into alleyways. A man approached wearing a garbage bag, a wind-breaker from the cold: "I know that I ain't garbage, I ain't human garbage." In the doorways thin men shivering without blankets curled asleep in the fetal position, dreaming of being reborn into different circumstances, circumstances that included a bed and a meal not fished out of a dumpster or provided by a shelter. More sleeping forms peppered the city, in the doorways of banks and in the doorway of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church near City Hall. Hundreds slept under bridges on Auburn Avenue and Edgewood, a stone's throw away from the tomb of Dr. King. The group watched, listened, learned, prayed, and wept.

B. "Agitation Theology" and the Economy of God

Jesus was a man, a carpenter by hand. His followers true and brave, but the cops and the legislators called them dangerous agitators, so they laid Jesus Christ in his grave.
Woody Guthrie

Just as the members of the Open Door community must enter the streets to close the distance between themselves and the homeless during holy week, they must also enter the streets, the chambers of City Hall, and Woodruff Park to bear witness to the City and demand justice for the poor. While their public actions may look political, from an Open Door perspective they are in fact spiritual, for it is ultimately a spiritual problem they are dealing with in a world that has rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The economic and political evils that the residents of Open Door call attention to are manifestations of a spiritually bankrupt social order. When members of Open Door call attention to the

burdens of the poor and the transgressions of the City Council, they do so loudly and with the goal of being a significant element of agitation to the social order:

> Agitation theology is our source of practice and our angle of vision. It is eclectic, partisan, progressive, true, loving, and heretical according to the doctrines of the mainline church and its offspring, the Prosperity Gospel. … We follow, dancing in the street and shouting in City Council, the Prince of Peace. Jesus' strongest anti war acts were to enter Jerusalem on Sunday on a donkey and die in the city on a cross on Friday, after raising hell all week with the religious elite and the Roman oppressors. You can't get to heaven unless you raise a lot of hell, that is, agitate![41]

Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "you have to make your vision apparent by shock, to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."[42] The members of Open Door shout and create startling images for a society that they believe to be deaf and blind. On August 15, 2006 members of Open Door, along with First Iconium Baptist Church and others from the Movement to Redeem the Soul of Atlanta, created a large and startling image for the City of Atlanta in demonstration against the one-year anniversary of the City Council's passing of the Commercial Solicitation Ordinance.[43]

On August 15, 2005, the City Council passed the Commercial Solicitation Ordinance which banned panhandling in the Central Business District of the City, a district also known as the tourist triangle.[44] On the evening of August 14, 2005, members of Open Door, along with other homeless advocates, began an all night prayer vigil at

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[41]Eduard Loring, *Agitator*, Hospitality, January 2007, at 3, 10.
[42] Russell Shaw, *Remembering Flannery O'Connor*, Catholic Herald, June 16, 2005, http://www.catholicherald.com/shaw/shaw05/shaw0616.htm .
[43] Calvin Kimbrough, *At City Hall 8/15/06*, Hospitality, October 2006, at 6.
[44] *See*, Anonymous, *Yes, It Is a Crime to be Poor in Atlanta, Georgia*, Hospitality, October 2005, at 7.

City Hall.[45] The next day in continuance of their vigil and in opposition to the ordinance, Open Door members along with the other advocates entered Council Chambers to speak out against the proposed ordinance and to be present for the vote.[46] The City Council's vote to prohibit panhandling was met with shrieks of protest and screams from members of Open Door.[47] In all, seven advocates were arrested, and six were from Open Door.[48] This vote continued what members of Open Door see as a long-time policy of the City of Atlanta to eliminate affordable housing and effectively remove the poor, and especially the homeless, from the City. Members of Open Door spoke out during City Council meetings against the Commercial Solicitation Ordinance for months prior to the August 2005 vote. During the June 10, 2005 City Council meeting, Murphy Davis addressed the Council:

> Federally subsidized public housing has become practically a thing of the past. And this city has shown no real interest in where its former residents might go. … Homelessness in Atlanta is a *direct* result of public policy. We planned and systematically carried out the wholesale destruction of affordable housing during the same years that low-end wages were shrinking. The national and local phenomenon of systematic homelessness is a fruit of our political decisions, and now we blame and vilify those who suffer the consequences.[49]

In 1981, 2005, and today, for Open Door it all goes back to Matthew Chapter 25, scripture that is both prescription and description for practice at Open Door:

> [F]or I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me

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[45] *Id.*
[46] *See*, Anonymous, *Yes, It Is a Crime to be Poor in Atlanta, Georgia*, Hospitality, October 2005, at 7.
[47] *Id.*
[48] *Id.*
[49] Murphy Davis, *Is it Really a Crime to be Poor?*, Hospitality, August 2005, at 1.

> drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. … Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.[50]

Members of the Community erect tent cities, speak out in City Council meetings, and go to jail because "God is present among us in the poor and suffering ones: the sickest, hungriest, smelliest, most neglected, most condemned. How we treat them is a direct indication of our love of God."[51]

In the passage of the anti-panhandling ordinance in present day Atlanta, the Bible is once again brought to life for members of Open Door, and strikingly creative parallels are made to illustrate that the marginalization of the poor today is reminiscent of marginalization within the Bible. It is the same story throughout the ages. And through the retelling of the story the faithful remnant of Open Door assure themselves and remain steadfast.

> The Radical Remnant is today small, dismissed, persecuted marginalized and time warped. But it has always been that way. In the year 850 B.C., the Prophet Elijah was sitting in a cave on Mt. Sinai. Elijah had been complaining to Yahweh-Elohim that King Ahab and Queen Jezebel wanted to kill him and that there were no faithful Hebrews left. … Yahweh-Elohim told him to stop his belly aching; there was a remnant of 7,000 folks in Israel who were faithful and not afraid of the police, jails, Church courts, or Central Jerusalem Progress and their "Leper Removal Act."[52]

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[50] *Matthew* 25:35, 36, 40 (New Oxford Annotated). This Biblical passage combined with the Beatitudes constitutes some of the primary scriptural foundation for the work at Open Door.
[51] Murphy Davis, A Work of Hospitality, *Loving the Poor and Embracing the Radical Gospel: Matthew 25 as a Liberation Spirituality* 23 (Peter R. Gathje ed., 2002).
[52] Eduard Loring, *Peter Waldo: A Life and Legacy of the Radical Remnant of the Discipleship Movement,* Hospitality, September 2005, at 1.

The public action marking the one year anniversary began very early on the morning of August 15, 2006. As with so many other Open Door activities, this public action involved food. The Open Door's Eucharist table was extended to the steps of City Hall where tables were set up and breakfast was served to hundreds of hungry and homeless residents of downtown. Multiple television stations and newspapers covered the event, which included the serving of breakfast, songs and prayers, and numerous speeches. As morning passed into afternoon around forty-five activists entered City Hall and proceeded upstairs to Council Chambers and the mayor's office. Traditional African-American spirituals and songs of protest were sung loudly. As the group made its way through City Hall it was followed by police and threatened with arrest. After holing up in several different offices, all the while increasing the volume of shouts, singing and demands, the activists were finally able to speak to a single council member.

After leaving City Hall, without a single arrest, attention turned to Central Atlanta Progress, a driving force behind the ordinance, and the group proceeded to march very noisily from City Hall across town to the Central Atlanta Progress ("CAP") offices located directly in the middle of the Georgia State University campus.[53] The activists had been warned all day by police that if they continued their protest at CAP they would be arrested. Undeterred and shaking cans filled with coins, the activists marched and panhandled their way to the CAP offices where they proceeded to panhandle every single person entering and leaving the building. The CAP offices are located in the same building as the City Grille, an upscale restaurant located directly above the CAP offices.

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[53] *See*, Murphy Davis, *Is it Really a Crime to be Poor?*, Hospitality, August 2005, at 1,10 for a discussion of the history of Central Atlanta Progress and its involvement in the drafting and passage of the Commercial Solicitation Ordinance.

The City Grille has wide clear windows so that passersby can look in at the elegant surroundings where the city elite dine. There were probably forty demonstrators total and close to half of those were homeless. Along with panhandling, the demonstrators screamed for "help!" The police arrived and the manager of the building came outside to meet with the police and the demonstrators in order to determine how she could most quickly persuade the demonstrators to leave. At one point a chant of "we want a meal at the Capital Grille" began. The manager looked absolutely horrified, and as though she was going to faint. The color drained from her face and she went from appearing somewhat pleasant and reasonable to rigid. One must suppose that the thought of forty vagabonds traipsing into the refined premises of the Grille was more than she could bear. This was street theatre at its best and the group dissolved in laughter, fools for Christ and agitators all. The group dispersed shortly thereafter and headed back to Open Door for a meal.

Shortly after protesting the one year anniversary of the adoption of the Commercial Solicitation ordinance, Open Door turned its energies to the Festival of Shelters. The Festival of Shelters, like Holy Week with the Homeless, is a yearly Open Door tradition that began in 1989. The Festival of Shelters is a harvest celebration based on the Jewish holy day Sukkot.[54] It is a time of memory, dangerous memory in Open Door terms, when one is called to remember the forty years in the wilderness when the people of God were homeless and lived in temporary shelters, yet were provided for with manna from God. In the past the Open Door Community has celebrated by erecting

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[54] *See*, Jonathan Springston, *Festival of Shelters Held at Woodruff Park*, Atlanta Progressive News, October 4, 2006, http://www.atlantaprogressivenews.com/news/0095.html. *See generally* Eduard Loring, A Work of Hospitality, *The Festival of Shelters: Power for the Peace and justice Struggle* 241-246 (Peter R. Gathje ed., 2002).

temporary branch shelters and booths in public places as a call to remember homelessness and wilderness.[55] In reenactment of God providing the Israelites with manna, the Community serves meals to the hungry and homeless publicly, often in areas where such sharing is prohibited as it is in Woodruff Park. Throughout this celebration the Community calls the city to "resist the powers of pride and greed that create wealth for a few and poverty for many."[56]

Open Door residents celebrated the Festival of Shelters in 2006 from October 3 -5 at Woodruff Park. Despite being warned that members would be arrested if they attempted to feed the homeless in Woodruff Park, they proceeded to serve 2000 sandwiches and vats of steaming hot soup to hundreds of homeless and hungry people on October 4, notably the Feast of St. Francis the beggar, and October 5. On October 4 Members of the community and volunteers were met with approximately ten Atlanta police officers on motorcycles and a paddy wagon. Despite the police presence, the group was able to serve a meal /offer the Eucharist, without arrest or incident. They were also able to serve the same meal the next day.[57]

For Open Door residents, the Festival of Shelters is about economics; it is about the fact that some have great excess while others starve. In Open Door's view God's economics run counter to human economics, particularly capitalistic economics:

> The center of Jesus' economic message is that human beings are to share what they have with one another. Any surplus should be given to those who do not have enough. This hits capitalism right in the knees.

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[55] *See*, Eduard Loring, A Work of Hospitality, *The Festival of Shelters: Power for the Peace and justice Struggle* 244 (Peter R. Gathje ed., 2002).
[56] Calvin Kimbrough, *Festival of Shelters at Woodruff Park*, Hospitality, November-December 2006, at 6.
[57] *See id.*

> Capitalism is based on accumulation and Christianity is based on sharing. … The concept of rest in the Bible is a labor/economics issue. You worship God by resting. The basis of the Sabbath is economic. In the Old Testament we see that it is against the law to maximize profits, that's what gleaning is. Biblically speaking, you cannot have as economic norm efficiency.[58]

Thus, in Open Door theology the distribution of resources is a spiritual issue and not merely a political or economic issue. For Open Door members, Jesus was absolutely and deeply concerned with economics. To maximize profits and enjoy luxuries while others starve is not just unethical, it is irreligious. Here too we hear echoes of Rauschenbusch condemning the sins of capitalism. "Drink, over-eating, sexualism, vanity, and idleness are still reliable standardized sins. But the exponent of gigantic evil on the upper ranges of sin, is the love of money and the love of power over men which property connotes."[59]

Open Door members believe that there are political systems that better realize what one may think of as Sabbath economics, or God's economics, and founders openly support a form of Democratic Socialism. As Loring has said:

> I am a disciple of Jesus and a deeply Democratic Socialist and have been influenced appreciably by the work and thought of Karl Marx. Dr. King was a Democratic Socialist, capital D Democrat. … To follow Jesus is to make a preferential option for the poor. God makes a preferential option for the poor. We need an economic bill of rights to be added to our current Bill of Rights in the United States. We need a bill of rights to protect citizens from poverty. A bill of rights should include a right to

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[58] Interview with Eduard Loring, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 5, 2007).
[59] Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology for the Social Gospel 67 (Library of Theological Ethics ed., Westminster John Knox Press 1997) (1917).

> housing, food and education; material rights beyond the immaterial rights that we now possess.[60]

The Festival of Shelters continues the public witness and message that the urban prophets of Open Door are compelled to bring to the community at large. In brief: The message is that there is enough for everyone at God's table, and a nation of wealth that exists without providing the basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care and education, is a nation attempting to subvert God's vision, which is the beloved community. Moreover, the Gospel specifically brings good news in the form of liberation to the poor, and a society that contravenes this message through corporate enslavement, militarism, war, and tax cuts for the wealthy, is a rotten system that ought to be rejected and ultimately destroyed.

> A system that allows, even encourages, wealth in the face of hunger and homelessness is a filthy rotten system. Tear it down! Tear it down with love, compassion, sharing, and inclusion of every single one of us at the Welcome Table. Tear it down! And build it up: build up the beloved Community; build up a new world in the shell of the old.[61]

It should be clear by this point why I have chosen to designate Open Door theology "Liberation Gospel." The project of Open Door is the project of Jesus Christ as perceived by Open Door, which is, to bring good news to the poor and set the captives free, in a word: to *liberate*. And while the founders have been influenced by Liberation Theology, Dr. King, and the Catholic Worker movement, such influences have been seen

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[60] Interview with Eduard Loring, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 5, 2007).
[61]Eduard Loring, *Hunger & Eating: A Conversation, Part I*, Hospitality, February 2007, at 3.

through another lens from the margins. After hours of interviews, weeks of research, and a year and a half of participating in the life of Open Door, I am convinced that the most subversive activity the founders of Open Door ever engaged in was reading the Bible (especially the Gospels), taking it seriously, and committing themselves to a life of biblical study and analysis. The members of the Open Door Community are steeped in scripture; they study the Bible and pray as a group daily. This is the key to their longevity and their unfailing commitment to the poor for over twenty-five years. In a world of prosperity theology, many may find the liberation gospel of Open Door to be an oasis.

V. Behind the Closed Doors of Hospitality

Of course there are contradictions and tensions that operate within Open Door, and in this final chapter I want to account for some of them. But before this paper turns to critique I must first address how such a critique evolved. As an observer and participant at Open Door, I noticed practices that seemed to contradict the theology of Open Door as given voice by the residents of Open Door. During my research, several people who spoke with me, independent of my critique, voiced criticisms of Open Door that corresponded with my own critical observations. All of these sources were former residents or volunteers, and not a single one of these sources is willing to be formally interviewed or go on the record regarding their critique. Accordingly, while the observations and critiques of others may inform my own criticisms, the following criticisms are based upon my own observations and are not dependant upon confidential information that I have received from others.

As has been previously discussed in this paper, order is of great importance to the founders and partners of Open Door. One means of ensuring order is through the construction and maintenance of hierarchy; within Open Door there exists a strong hierarchy. While Open Door theology promotes a grassroots movement of community, internally Open Door structure maintains a strong top-down approach. The Open Door residents fall into multiple categories. The “leadership team” is comprised of certain long-term residents of Open Door who effectively comprise the governing body. Among their responsibilities, the leadership team decides which actions to engage in, when to close the house and not offer services, who will be invited to become a member of the leadership team, who is allowed to remain living in the house, and who must go. The

leadership team also meets out discipline and has the ability to ask people, usually "friends in the yard," although sometimes volunteers, to "be away" for a prescribed period of time. People may be asked to be away for a number of infractions including being drunk or high on the premises or in the yard, being verbally abusive, provoking altercations, or challenging the instructions or authority of the house duty person or members of the leadership team. At the very least, such a policy is an ironic practice for a group that spends much of its time challenging authority.

Additional questions arise when one considers the membership of the leadership team; for the physical make-up of the leadership team has the look of impropriety. For the entire time I have been involved with Open Door (about a year and a half) the membership of the leadership team has been comprised of well-educated white people. There are no people of color on the leadership team, and none of the members of the household who have come to the community from the streets are members of the leadership team.[62] This sort of inequality, or lack of diversity, in leadership, gives the appearance of paternalism at best, and at worst, seems to belie the community's commitment to racial and economic equality. The most common objection raised in response to a critique of Open Door, and the response I would expect to this critique, is that the person leveling the critique "just doesn't understand" because they don't live in the community. There may well be very good reasons that no persons of color, and no community members who were homeless are on the leadership team; however, in light of

[62] After finishing this critique I was notified that a member of the community who has lived in the community for several years, is African-American, and was formerly homeless was promoted to membership on the leadership team. The fact that this person was not on the leadership team has been a point of contention for at least the past eight months.

Open Door's theology an apparent contradiction exists, and at the very least it has the *look* of impropriety.

There is an additional hierarchy in the Open Door house. Household residents fall into one of three categories: resident volunteers, novices, or partners. The real power, however, does not appear to be vested in this structure, but in the leadership team. There are novices on the leadership team who have conspicuous authority in the community, while certain partners are not members of the leadership team and appear to wield little or no authority. The ranks of partner are made up of black and white, and those who were formerly homeless along with those from privileged backgrounds. Partnership has the look of being very egalitarian. However upon closer inspection it appears that not all partners are equal. Partners who were formerly homeless must go to partners who were not in order to obtain things like Marta tokens, set up medical appointments, and schedule vacations.

Again, one response to this is that certain partners have special needs and desire the additional help and security that other partners, who just happen to not be formerly homeless and are well educated, can provide. A careful observer who has been formed to view the world in terms of power dynamics and to recognize the opposing systems of oppression and liberation, an observer formed/informed by an Open Door theological perspective perhaps, might suggest that it is demeaning for poor, ill-educated, and often non-white people to have to go to well educated white people in order to request such simple things as tokens for the bus. One would think that it would be obvious to the leadership of a community that cites to Martin Luther King and Liberation Theology as primary theological influences, that it is demeaning to always have to look to the white

elite for everything from dispute resolution to bus tokens. The maintenance of power, even in seemingly innocuous ways, may still serve to reinforce inequity and oppression when the innocuous maintenance of power follows the dominant social script that disempowers the poor and the minority.

The disparity again appears if one considers the way in which physical space is used within the house. A cursory observation of the living space would show that well educated white people live upstairs and minorities and those who were formerly homeless live downstairs. There is some crossover in that some who are well educated and white may live downstairs, but the upstairs portion of the house is segregated. An examination of the physical living space would also show that the apartments of well educated white people are considerably larger than the living quarters of those who were formerly homeless, and/or minorities. In response, one may point out that the larger apartments go to couples, and this is reasonable; but some who maintain larger apartments are single, and they also happen to be white and well educated. There are no minority couples or formerly homeless couples living in the house.

It was pointed out earlier in this paper that, like those of the far Christian right, Open Door theology is unabashedly political and also at odds with popular culture. The analogy between Open Door theology and Christian fundamentalism should not stop here however. In fact, one could describe the theology of Open Door as fundamentalist in one additional sense. To clarify, like fundamentalists of the Christian right, there is *a* correct way to read the Bible and interpret scripture at Open Door, and the Open Door authority on scriptural interpretation is founder Eduard Loring. There is a reason that the source most frequently cited in this paper is Loring. His personality is enormous and it

shapes and drives Open Door much in the same way that a Pat Robertson figure has shaped and driven *The 700 Club*. If you do not tow the theological line at Open Door, you will not be welcome for long; the community must be in accord. At a minimum, political and theological disagreement with the leadership could cause significant conflict. Such a state of affairs is queer in a community that holds diversity as a virtue.

Loring's strength and influence in guiding the community are virtues if one considers the longevity of the community. He is a prolific writer, and his writings serve as testimony to his creativity and theological brilliance. Loring preaches with the fervor of an Old Testament prophet, and his energy never seems to abate; I doubt that a church has been built that could contain Eduard Loring. It is this very energy and drive in his quest for liberation and justice, which seems to have created a tunnel vision. Generally speaking, this tunnel vision only allows his remarkable ability for social criticism and keen powers of observation to flow in one direction, and that direction is a direction external to the community.

Related to the notion of a fundamentalist approach to theology is the rejection of criticism. It is this critique that is most troubling. During an interview concerning life in community and the theology of Open Door, Murphy Davis related the following hope: "When we slip we hope faithful friends will point it out and we'll correct it. Here we make space for everybody."[63] It is my perception based upon all of my observations, interviews, and experiences that Davis and the other members of the leadership team intend for that statement to be true. But the reality is that numerous people involved with Open Door through the years, even some of them staunch supporters for over a decade, have raised concerns similar to those explored in this critique, and the response from the

[63] Interview with Murphy Davis, Partner, Open Door Community (Jan. 25, 2007).

leadership team, almost without exception, is to close ranks, reject the critique, and reject the person making the critique. It does not appear to matter if the concerns are raised in a careful and loving way by people very close to the community. One explanation of this is that Open Door is invested in opposition. For so long, and in many ways, the leadership of Open Door have been engaged in a battle of us against them, them being the entire economic, political, and social establishment; perhaps at some point it becomes impossible, or extremely hard, to disengage from such a position. Or perhaps it is simply one of those cruel ironies that great people have great flaws. When one is fighting a righteous battle, perhaps one can be blinded by such righteousness. I do not have answers to the contradictions I have outlined, and, unfortunately, experience dictates that these observations will not lead to fruitful honest discussion and examination at Open Door. This final assessment is a reality that leaves me deeply saddened, because the fact of the matter is that I think that the members of Open Door operate with the best of intentions, and get it right, in practice and theology, the vast majority of the time.

VI. Conclusion

Open Door is a community that could simply exist as a masala of leftist Christian theologies and movements, but through twenty-five years of praxis and reflection, the Open Door has internalized its influences and developed its own unique theology, a theology I have come to term Liberation Gospel.

One hallmark of a distinct theology within a tradition is the ability to form lifelong disciples in that theology. More than anything else, the ability to form disciples in a particular way is Open Door's most important contribution to Christianity. In my research I have met dozens of people who have been formed by Open Door theology. These people are active as scholars, ministers, and activist, outside of, and apart from, the Open Door Community. These people, these radical disciples, all carry the mark of Open Door experiences in their beliefs and actions. Most importantly, they teach Christianity in churches, in seminaries, and in universities, as scholars and practitioners formed by Open Door theology. Notably, this is true even of those who were ultimately rejected by Open Door due to their criticisms of Open Door. I can not estimate how long Open Door will continue to operate, it could be five years or fifty years, and for the sake of the homeless and poor of Atlanta I hope it is the latter. But what I do know is that the influence of Open Door will be felt for generations to come.