



AN EXAMINATION OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS DISPLAYED BY EDMUND RICE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS

—EVERETT JOSEPH ADAMS, CHARLES SALINA, AND JOANIE EPPINGA

When Jesus Christ washed the feet of His followers and asked that they do the same for each other, He presented a servant-leadership style centered on empathy and *agapao* love, the compulsion to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons. That style is as relevant today as it was so many years ago (Stone and Patterson 2005).

In the 1990s, servant-leadership emerged as a practical operational approach for Catholic school communities and gained popularity among leadership theorists and practitioners (Black 2010). The philosophy of servant-leadership, which places the leader's commitment to his followers above organizational goals, was introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970. In *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf offered a definition of the servant-leader: "The servant leader *is* servant first . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (6).

Greenleaf (1970) identified four distinct characteristics that differentiate a servant-leader from one who is leader first. "The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest-priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?" (6, emphasis in original).

Greenleaf envisioned a servant-leader as one who seeks not to be served, but rather to serve: a caring and empathetic individual who uses every available opportunity to help others to grow personally and to become servants themselves.



The language, principles, and characteristics of servant-leadership are the most appropriate leadership style for leaders in Catholic schools (Schafer 2005). The servant-leadership characteristics of empathy, the commitment to the growth of people, and community-building are essential elements of Catholic education (Schafer 2005).

Background

The Congregation of Christian Brothers was founded by Edmund Rice, an Irish businessman who devoted his life to serving others. In 1802, Rice established an improvised school for orphaned and disenfranchised boys in a converted stable on his property in Waterford, Ireland. Edmund's ministry was defined by two tenets: standing in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and serving others unconditionally. After feeding and clothing the throwaway boys of Waterford, Edmund taught them to read, write, and master a trade. Many of the boys became teachers at Rice's school. In 1808, Edmund and several of his staff took religious vows, and in 1820, the Congregation of Christian Brothers was established (Vercruysse 2007).

The example of Edmund's early ministry is one of service to others with the intent to empower and transform individuals so they may become stronger and healthier, develop personal autonomy, and be converted into servant-leaders. In many ways, Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice was the definitive servant-leader.

The Brothers define themselves as lay leaders. They demonstrate dedication to Christ by taking vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, and by living in community (Faith 2011). For more than forty years, the Christian Brothers have built a faith community at St. Thomas More High School (STM) in South Burnaby, British Columbia, which they established in 1960. At STM, the Brothers emulated St. Thomas More through religious education and faith formation.

The vision of the Christian Brothers has always been to continue the ministry begun by Jesus Christ and inspired by the vision of Blessed Edmund Rice (Founder 2011). Two elements of the Christian Brothers' formal mission statement especially align with servant-leadership: (1) stand in solidarity with those marginalized by poverty and injustice, and (2) celebrate the value and dignity of each person and nurture the development of the whole person (Congregation of Christian Brothers 2006).



Over five decades, the Christian Brothers have built STM into a unique faith-based community of learners who respect all life and witness to their faith on a daily basis. Today, the Edmund Rice Christian Brothers continue to be committed to the growth of people and to building a faith community at STM. In 2003, St. Thomas More Collegiate became a limited liability company. The Christian Brothers on staff are active members of the STM community; however, they are dwindling in number.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine Christian Brothers' self-perception of their beliefs and behaviors as they relate to Greenleaf's (1970) four characteristics of a servant-leader. This paper explores the Brothers' belief system and how it is expressed in their daily lives within the context of Greenleaf's (1970) definition of a servant-leader.

Characteristics of a Servant-Leader

Greenleaf's (1970) original definition of a servant-leader identified four distinct qualities that differentiated a servant-leader from one who is leader first. According to Greenleaf, those qualities are: (1) a servant-leader is a servant-first, ensuring other people's highest-order needs are being served; (2) a servant-leader is committed to others' growth, aspiring to make followers healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous; (3) a servant-leader inspires others to lead, so that followers are more likely to become servants as a result of being led; and (4) a servant-leader helps the poor and the disadvantaged, focusing on caring for the least privileged in society (6).

The servant-leadership example set by the Christian Brothers helps remind the staff and students of STM of the actions of Jesus Christ and brings the community into the presence of the divine. The immeasurable wealth of knowledge that the Brothers have accrued through lived servant-leadership experiences can provide invaluable insights into how lay teachers can grow in their faith, commit to lifelong professional development, dedicate themselves entirely to their school communities, and foster the lifelong spiritual and religious formations of their students.

Servant-Leadership

Greenleaf coined the term *servant-leadership* in 1970. Greenleaf (2003) envisioned a servant-leader as one who seeks not to be served, but to



serve—a caring and empathetic individual who uses every available opportunity to help others. In a relational context, service to others is not an emotional endeavor, but a moral imperative (Stone and Patterson 2005).

Larry Spears (1998) later expanded on Greenleaf's original writings and compiled the following list of servant-leadership characteristics: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. These ten characteristics reflect and embody the characteristics that one would expect to see being practiced by leaders in Catholic schools (Black 2010).

Christian Brother servant-leadership. *Charism* is a term used to describe an extraordinary power or gift that has been bestowed upon the founders of religious organizations by the Holy Spirit for the betterment of the Church. The Christian Brothers rely on the charism of Edmund Rice to provide a clear mission for the Christian Brothers. Coldrey and Kilmartin (1989) defined Edmund Rice's charism as an attempt to live the life of Christ, with a specific dedication to the materially poor.

Setting and Participants

St. Thomas More Collegiate is a Catholic independent school in South Burnaby, British Columbia. According to the school's website (<http://stthomasmorecollegiate.ca/>), the student population of STM is 672, with about 55 faculty, administration, and support staff. St. Thomas More High School was founded in 1960 by the Congregation of Christian Brothers.

The participants in this phenomenological study included five Christian Brothers who directly and indirectly served the St. Thomas More Collegiate educational community for, collectively, more than 175 years. The Christian Brothers "is a lay religious order of men united in ministry to the poor and marginalized, and devoted to the Christian education of youth" (Faith 2011). The worldwide mandate of the Christian Brothers is "the continued education and care of young people, whom they endeavor to lead to faith in Christ, to a sense of belonging to the Church and to the full development of their human potential" ("Faith," 2011). The Christian Brothers at St. Thomas More have acted as teachers, administrators, youth leaders, missionaries, counselors, ministers to the poor, and more (Compassion in Action 2011).



The participants were selected due to their distinguished record of service to St. Thomas More. Each of the Brothers was renowned for his dedication to the mission of the Congregation of Christian Brothers and to living out the charism of the founder, Blessed Edmund Rice. The participants ranged in age from their early fifties to their mid seventies.

Data Collection

A qualitative semistructured interview method was used to collect data regarding the Christian Brothers' self-perceptions of beliefs and behaviors as they related to Greenleaf's (1970) four characteristics of a servant-leader. The Christian Brothers answered questions regarding their belief system and their formal faith formation, and their responses were compared with Greenleaf's four distinct characteristics of a servant-leader.

The Brothers were asked informal, open-ended questions to elicit candid thoughts and multiple examples of Christian Brother beliefs and behaviors. After the interviews had been completed, an inductive analysis of the transcribed interview data was conducted. Words, phrases, and statements were identified that specifically addressed the Christian Brothers' self-ascribed beliefs and behaviors and Greenleaf's (1970) four characteristics of a servant-leader. Four categories of narrative information were identified as reappearing throughout the data: a servant-leader is servant first; a servant-leader is committed to the growth of people; a servant-leader inspires other to serve; and a servant-leader helps the poor and the disadvantaged. The data were interpreted in relation to how the findings may guide future practice (Mertler 2009).

Ted. Ted had served St. Thomas More Collegiate for more than fifty years. During his teaching career, Ted taught primarily science, mathematics, and computer sciences. Ted was a track-and-field coach. Ted had also served the STM community as the maintenance director and the business manager. Ted was the headmaster of St. Mary's Academy on the Caribbean island of Dominica for almost three years in the late 1960s. Ted's commitment to the growth of the students and faculty at STM was unparalleled.

Cass. Cass had served the Congregation of Christian Brother for more than fifty years, as an English teacher, as a recruitment officer for Christian Brother vocations, and as an accomplished basketball coach. Thousands of photographs taken by Cass adorned the walls of STM, serving as a vibrant



record of school life. Cass was also the driving force behind the school's outstanding Missions support and Christian outreach programs. Cass's enthusiasm was contagious, and he was a familiar presence in the hallways, giving high-fives and fist-bumps.

John. John served as a Christian Brother for more than forty years. As president of STM, John was highly respected for his level-headedness, financial acumen, and unwavering faith. John helped establish the directorate that eventually assumed control of the holdings and the operations of the school in 2003. At the time of the interviews, John ministered to the elderly.

Hugh. Hugh served the Congregation of Christian Brothers for more than forty years and the STM community for eight years; he was regarded as a dedicated administrator and a persuasive, respected leader. At STM Hugh was also an inspiring basketball coach who realized that sports were an important way to keep students connected with the mission and vision of Blessed Edmund Rice. At the time of the interviews, Hugh was the leader of the Christian Brother North American province. Hugh was regarded as a solid and supportive leader known for compassion.

Ray. Ray served the Christian Brothers for more than forty years. A rare expert on the history of the Christian Brother congregation in North America, Ray was a caring leader who wrote about faith formation and spirituality in Catholic schools, elucidating the most vital principle in Catholic education: that life should be viewed as the breath of God within each of us.

Thematic Analysis

In line with Greenleaf (1970), the Brothers who were interviewed indicated that their devotion to serving others was a personal conviction that influenced their decisions and actions.

A servant-leader is a servant first. Ray recalled that the Christian Brothers who taught him in high school were servants first; they were always there when he needed them. Ray noted, "I felt God was calling me to help others, and I have made it a belief and a personal practice to be servant-first, to always be helpful to my students, and to always be of service to people."

Like Ray, John strongly believed that he was called to serve others. He explained, "People need other people; by our very nature, humans are interdependent." John suggested that serving others is also an effective way to demonstrate to people that no one is alone in the world. Like Greenleaf



(1970), John noted that servant-leadership helps both servant-leaders and followers—that, as Greenleaf put it, “the search for wholeness is something they share” (20).

John indicated that his servant-first disposition was the result of his formal faith formation as a Christian Brother. John said that during his religious training, he was reminded by his superiors to be cognizant of the needs of others and to live out the charism of Edmund Rice. John pointed out that “the Christian Brothers have gone to those places where there was a desperate need . . . and the Brothers have served those communities well.” John expressed pride in the Christian Brothers’ choice to serve and to educate generations.

John explained that the Brothers are an apostolic order known throughout the world for their visibility, their accessibility, and above all, their humanity. As John put it, “You are a Brother, but you are a human; you are available, you are approachable, you are accessible; it is just who you have to be if you really want to help people.”

Like Ray and John, Hugh exemplified what Greenleaf (1970) called “servant-first leadership.” Hugh’s objective was to discover ways to better serve his followers and to nurture the development of the whole person. Hugh explained that service to others is a shared core value among the Brothers and “an invaluable growth experience.” Hugh reported that his experiences abroad had allowed him to see through the eyes of other cultures, to see new possibilities and opportunities. According to Greenleaf (1970), Hugh’s heightened conceptual insight is the mark of a natural servant-leader.

Ted also proved himself to be a “servant-first leader.” When asked what his core values were, Ted said, “Serving others and commitment to a community.” For Ted, commitment to a community was synonymous with service to others. Ted said he had once listened to a Jesuit speaker who, in Ted’s words, asserted that “there is a need for people who are committed to *this* way of life in *this* place.” When discussing his commitment to the STM community, Ted stated, “STM is home, Burnaby is home, I’ve given three-quarters of my life to this community.” Greenleaf noted that a servant-leader has a strong attachment to his home and a great interest in and affection for his followers.

All five of the Brothers who were interviewed expressed the belief that their formal religious training was influential in cultivating a servant-first disposition; however, each of the Brothers pointed out that the most important lessons that he learned about serving others were modeled for him by



other Christian Brothers. John recalled that his spiritual director encouraged him to act with a purity of intention. John interpreted this message to mean: “Whatever you’re doing, do it as well as you can; do it for the glory of God, do it for others.” John further explained that by serving he hoped he was “promoting the way of God, to bring about a measure of peace, a measure of justice. And the result, hopefully, is that I am making the lives of others better as well.” John added, “Serving others is not about blind devotion—it is about purity of intention; that is the message that really stood out for me.”

Like John, Ted reported that his formal training as a Christian Brother influenced him to become a servant-first leader. Ted said he had always felt that the need to serve others superseded any other directive of the congregation. Ted explained that a unique aspect of the Christian Brothers’ congregation is that each Brother is encouraged to discern a way of working with the presence of God in his life so that he can discover the best way to respond to God’s call to serve. Ted noted that the call to serve others was something that was characteristic of the Christian Brother congregation, but he was adamant in asserting that answering the call to serve others was also a deeply personal experience.

Cass related stories and anecdotes that revealed his servant-first leadership disposition. As a child, Cass was educated by the Christian Brothers and experienced their servant-first disposition first-hand. In the early days, Cass recollected, the Brothers did not have enough classrooms, so they gave up their rooms and manually dug a basement out of the coal cellar of the house to create ten twelve-by-eight-foot living spaces for themselves. This example, which Cass affirmed had affected him deeply, exemplifies Greenleaf’s (1970) assertion that servant-first leaders ensure that other people’s basic human needs are met before they consider their personal needs.

That assertion was again illustrated in an anecdote Ted provided that illustrated the Christian Brothers’ dedication to serving the needs of others. In 1969, Ted was sent to be the headmaster of St. Mary’s Academy on the island of Dominica, in the West Indies. Because of his dedication to serve, Ted took on an incredibly taxing teaching load. Ted remembered, “I had taken on too much, but the kids needed a teacher.” Even though Ted recognized that he had overextended himself, his story clearly illustrates his servant-first disposition.

Greenleaf (1970) asserted that a servant-leader is a servant first. The narratives and anecdotes provided by all five of the Brothers clearly illustrate that the Brothers were servant-first leaders. Time and time again, the



Brothers described how their core beliefs and actions directly aligned with Greenleaf's description of a servant-first leader, one who serves first and puts the basic human needs of others before his or her own needs.

A servant-leader is committed to the growth of people. Greenleaf (1970) described a servant-leader as someone who aspires to make his or her followers healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous. All five of the Brothers who were interviewed connected their personal commitment to the growth of people with the fifth essential element of a Christian Brother education, which calls the Brothers to celebrate the basic human dignity of every person and to nurture the development of the whole person (Congregation of Christian Brothers 2000).

When asked to identify his core beliefs, Hugh offered the following explanation: "I believe that the spirit of God dwells within all of creation and that as humans, we have the gift of awareness, and if we use that gift of awareness we can become aware of that presence of God. I guess another core belief is the whole aspect of relationship. Our faith isn't just about an individual piety; it's about a relationship with others, and it's through those relationships that we actually get glimpses into God and experiences of God." Hugh's dedication to building community by cultivating relational trust is a clear example of what Greenleaf (1970) called the servant-leader's personal commitment to the growth of people.

Ted related a story about the Christian Brothers' commitment to the growth of people that occurred during his formal religious training in upstate New York. Ted said that his superiors always stressed spiritual reading. Ted said that he did the usual amount of reading, but he was always interested in nature and had a desire to learn. The long driveway at the Christian Brothers' house was lined with sugar maple trees. Ted began to read about the process of distilling maple syrup. Ted was so excited about the prospect that he asked his superiors if he could buy some hardware and tap the trees. Then he showed three other prospective Brothers how to drill the trees and collect the sap. The men got pots from the kitchen and boiled the sap on an open fire pit by the lake. Ted explained that the maple syrup story is indicative of the Christian Brothers' commitment to the growth of people. Even though making maple syrup was not part of the formal faith formation process, his superiors recognized his burning desire to learn and to grow. Ted acknowledged that his love of learning was what motivated him to keep teaching at seventy-five years of age. Ted said that as an informal leader in the classroom he made every attempt to kindle the



desire for learning in his students, just as the Brothers encouraged him to explore and learn on his own terms. Ted's story about tapping the maple trees is an example of the Christian Brothers' ability to empathize with Ted and accept him on his own terms. As Greenleaf (1970) so artfully phrased it, acceptance and empathy can build people up "to grow taller than they would otherwise be" (11).

Cass's beliefs and actions demonstrated a disposition toward what Greenleaf (1970) called the servant-leader's commitment to the growth of people. Cass revealed that the core belief that governed his behaviors was his belief in the inherent human dignity of every person. Cass said he felt grateful to be an educator because teaching provided him with innumerable opportunities to show people that every individual is unique and that every life is a gift from God. Cass said, "It is our job to show students the goodness that is in all of them, even the rogues; they may think they're being bad, but they're just being human in most cases. Trying to make them feel good about themselves, I think, is a gift." Cass said that he loved being in education because "you just get so many opportunities to give people the tools they need to improve their lives." Cass directly connected his commitment to the growth of people and his belief in the importance of affirming students with the charism of Edmund Rice. Cass explained that Edmund was a man who was always investing in his community and who was dedicated to empowering people. Cass spoke of how Edmund taught the boys in his schools a skilled trade so that they could become self-sufficient. Cass said that Edmund also donated money to the church specifically for the care of the poor. Cass reasoned, "Edmund Rice tried to help people and build them up as best he could, so carrying on that spirit is a very important thing to me."

Greenleaf (1970) asserted that a servant-leader always accepts people and never rejects people. Greenleaf suggested that rejecting people was akin to throwing them away. Cass's acceptance and affirmation of students directly aligns with Greenleaf's contention that a servant-leader is committed to the growth of people.

Like Cass, John fostered the growth of people through his belief in the inherent human dignity of every person. As an educator, John said, he went out of his way to help people realize their worth. John reasoned, "Life is a gift that can never be sullied or devalued or lost, irrespective of the many ways that human beings can go seriously astray. An individual's inherent dignity can be well disguised, but it is still there." John felt obligated "to



help others see the divinity that is inside them, to help them see God's face when they look in the mirror."

Apart from valuing the inherent dignity of all people, John also believed in their fundamental goodness. John conceded that people sometimes do terrible things, usually out of weakness or fear, but he contended that they rarely hurt others or themselves out of malice. John asserted that students who hurt others can be helped if someone is willing to listen to them, counsel them, and help them identify and resolve the real issues that are causing their inappropriate behaviors. John explained that after dealing with a student's difficult behavior, "I always tried to chat further with the person and try to better understand the individual and why they committed an antisocial act." John passionately defended his belief in the fundamental goodness of people, as he explained that some people had difficult lives, "and consequently they have been left in a shattered state; but when you actually talk with them, and you listen to them, you really discover the deep, deep goodness that's there."

A testament to John's commitment to the growth of people is that he always went out of his way to discover and acknowledge the goodness within those he encountered. In his work with the aged, John said, he met a curmudgeonly man who was generally unpleasant. John made a point of watching the man, looking for the goodness in him. John observed that although the man's behavior was generally antisocial, he never left the breakfast table without taking an egg or a muffin to one of the other residents who was physically unable to come to the breakfast table. John remarked that society is often quick to judge and condemn people. However, John said he tried to avoid being judgmental by constantly reminding himself that regardless of how "unapproachable a person appears to be, I cannot be dismissive of that person, because somewhere inside that person, there is that spark of goodness, that piece of God." John's affirmation of people aligns with Greenleaf's (1970) contention that acceptance is essential to a servant-leader's commitment to the growth of people. Greenleaf observed, "Anybody could lead perfect people—if there were any. But there aren't any perfect people" (10).

Ray also revealed that commitment to the growth of people is one of his core beliefs. Ray said, "My core beliefs are my commitment to my students and my passion for Catholic education." Ray stated that he is deeply committed to the faith development and faith formation of his students, but is equally committed to the continued faith formation of adults. Ray explained that his own faith formation is an ongoing journey, and he expressed the



belief that his inner faith journey radiates out to his students. Ray noted that his students see him searching for meaning and examining his life, and that as a result, his students feel comfortable being themselves around him. Ray said that his passion was about “The search for the Holy, that level of welcome and comfort, that ability to make people feel a part of something and the feeling of being a part of something. I think that I can help people come to recognize that God loves them for who they are.” Ray’s commitment to the growth of people calls to mind Greenleaf’s description of a servant-leader: “He has a goal—to bring more compassion into the lives of people” (15).

Ted recounted a story that served as an excellent example of the servant-leader’s commitment to the growth of people. Ted’s service as headmaster for three years at St. Mary’s Academy, in Dominica, took place in a time of civil unrest. Ted explained that many of the black teachers were militant and combative toward the school administration. In addition to addressing racial tension, Ted had to deal with the abject poverty that plagued the region and the lack of support from parents. Ted had a difficult experience in the West Indies, and he learned that he did not enjoy being a headmaster. Ted asked to return to STM, explaining to the Christian Brothers’ leadership that he felt that he had more to contribute as a classroom teacher. Ted viewed his time in the West Indies as a growth experience in which he learned that his strength was in being “somewhere down the totem pole” where he could observe situations and make suggestions about how to do things differently. Ted described how his time in Dominica and his subsequent return to Canada related to the Christian Brothers’ commitment to the growth of people. Because the Christian Brothers take a vow of obedience, they are required to go where they are needed most. Ted reported that staying in one place and serving one community was not something that was part of the North American psyche of the Christian Brothers at that time. Although doing so deviated from the norms of the day, the Christian Brothers’ leadership allowed Ted to return to his home at STM, where he felt healthier, freer, more autonomous, and better able to serve the community. Greenleaf asserted that servant-leaders know who they are and where they can do the most good for the most people, so they choose their own role. Greenleaf noted that staying the course and trusting one’s intuition is an example of how strong servant-leaders “know who they are and resolve to be their own men and will accept making their way to their goal by one action at a time, with a lot of frustration along the way” (17).



John demonstrated his commitment to the growth of people through adherence to Greenleaf's (1970) emphasis on building community. John suggested that serving others is really about human interdependency and the human touch. John explained, "To really be human, and to be fully alive, and to flourish as a human being, you have to have close friendships and close relationships." John explained that he has come to believe that "serving others does not represent a loss of one's humanity; rather, serving others and building relationships based on trust is perhaps the truest expression of one's humanity." John's commitment to building community directly aligns with Greenleaf's contention that servant-leaders are committed to the growth of people.

Greenleaf (1970) asserted that a servant-leader is committed to helping people grow by making them feel freer, healthier, wiser, and more autonomous. Each of the Brothers provided excellent examples of how their personal beliefs and core values reflected a commitment to the growth of people. Hugh demonstrated this commitment through his acknowledgement of the basic human dignity of every person. Ray showed his commitment to the growth of people by bringing tolerance, understanding, and compassion to people's lives. Ted confirmed his commitment to the growth of people by being his own man and doing what was best for his community. Cass verified his commitment to the growth of people by accepting, affirming, and empathizing with the students whom he taught. John established this commitment through his dedication to building community. Ted encapsulated the essence of commitment to the growth of people in one eloquent utterance: "The important thing to remember about teaching is that curriculum simply gives you an opportunity to build and really help people become the best that they can be; because teaching isn't about words in books, teaching is about people."

A servant-leader inspires others to serve. According to Greenleaf (1970), servant-leaders inspire their followers to become servants themselves. John indicated that the Brothers were important role models who inspired him to serve others. In particular he remembered a Brother who taught math, a difficult subject for John. John found the Brother to be inspiring for many reasons: he had expertise in his subject, he was a masterful teacher, he had a great sense of humor, he was genuinely concerned about the students in his class, and he was strong and masculine; but he was also a holy man. John said, "What stood out for me was how impressive this Brother was; he seemed to know everything, he helped me enjoy a subject



that I previously disliked, and he always started class with a prayer. It is obvious to me that if there was a person who influenced me to become a Brother, I'd have to say it was that man." This Brother, a servant-leader, inspired John's servant-leadership.

Like John, Cass was inspired by a particular Brother. Cass recalled that Brother O'Keefe was a very bright man who taught mathematics and physics. Like John, Cass confessed that math was not his strongest subject; nonetheless, Brother O'Keefe helped Cass become a very strong math student. Cass described Brother O'Keefe as "a fantastic role model . . . he provided an excellent example to me of how to serve others. He would come at any time to help students, whether it was tutoring or extra help." Brother O'Keefe inspired Cass through his personal example of service to others. Cass said that all of the boys at his school thought that Brother O'Keefe was the epitome of a strong, no-nonsense Catholic man. Cass noted that Brother O'Keefe's caring, compassion, empathy, competence, and unselfishness directly inspired Cass to become a Christian Brother.

Ray too was inspired by his Christian Brother role models to become a servant-leader himself. Ray recounted that during high school, it was the Brothers' approach to education that made him feel significant as a person. Ray remembered being impressed with the Brothers' knowledge of their subject matter and with their ability to find a way to make the curriculum relevant to each student. Like John and Cass, Ray struggled with math until he was taught by a particular Brother. Ray related that after having this Brother teach him for four years, "I certainly improved my math skills enough to say, 'I know what it feels like to have to struggle at math and someday I'd like to be a math teacher because I understand those struggles.'" Ray described the influence that the Christian Brothers had on his own vocation to serve, saying that it was the personal relationship with someone "who made you feel important and who helped me learn that inspired me to say, 'Hey, I think I can do the same thing for other people.'"

A servant-leader helps the poor and the disadvantaged. Greenleaf (1970) asserted that servant-leaders must always focus their attentions on the poor and disadvantaged in society. Some of the stories that the Brothers told during the interviews connected their dedication to the poor with the third essential element of a Christian Brother education, which requires the Brothers to stand in solidarity with those marginalized by poverty and societal injustice (Congregation of Christian Brothers 2000).

In many instances, the Brothers stated that they had felt empathy and compassion for the poor from a very early age. Some of the Brothers said



that seeing their parents and siblings perform charitable acts for the poor was the impetus for their vocation to serve others. John understood from an early age that even though his family of twelve did not have an abundance of anything, they shared what they had with the poor. John said, “There was always that idea in my upbringing of the importance of looking out for disadvantaged people and of being conscious of the needs of people who were less fortunate, and I think that made an impact on me.”

Ray too reported that watching his family perform charitable acts in their community had a profound effect on him and on his belief system. Ray explained that “their commitment to Church and to community certainly rubbed off on me. . . . I think that was certainly the beginning for me of a sense of understanding what it meant to be linked with people.”

Cass also asserted that his dedication to serving the poor was influenced by the charitable acts that his parents performed during his childhood. Cass explained that developing compassion for the poor and less fortunate was something that was modeled for him at home throughout his formative years. “We were in hand-me-down clothes. . . . We used to sweep parts of the school to get a reduction on tuition. There wasn’t a lot of money floating around our household, but my parents always gave to mission collections; they were always helping out others.” The acts of selflessness and generosity that Cass’s parents modeled for him are examples of actions that directly benefit the least privileged in society. Because Cass saw his parents give so generously even when they had so little, Cass realized how important it was to care for the less fortunate. The lived experiences of John, Ray, and Cass all indicate that one of the core beliefs ascribed to the Christian Brothers that directly aligns with Greenleaf’s (1970) characteristics of a servant-leader is dedication to the materially poor.

Cass insisted that devotion to the poor also encompassed caring for the poor in spirit. Cass felt that it was equally important to advocate for students who are marginalized, in adherence to the third essential element of a Christian Brother education (Congregation of Christian Brothers 2000). Cass recounted a story about an instance when another Brother supported a marginalized student. When Cass was the principal of a school in British Columbia, there was a girl in grade seven who had dropped out of school only after the teachers had tried desperately to help her get her life on track. Cass remembered how disappointed he felt when the girl left school, because so many staff members had gone out of their way to help the girl. One day, the girl returned to school at lunch time and behaved in a confrontational manner toward the teachers and the other students. Cass could not



believe that the girl had the audacity to return to the school and make trouble after everything they had done for her. Cass approached the girl, intending to remove her from the school grounds. Just then, Cass recalled, Brother Slattery walked over to the girl, put his hand on her arm, and began to talk to her. Cass did not remember exactly what Brother Slattery said, but he vividly recalled that Brother Slattery's actions completely diffused a volatile situation. Cass said, "I'm not sure how he did it, but he distracted me and made me think for a second. It gave me pause; it gave me time to put my hurt feelings aside and back off and walk away. Talk about leadership—he just knew right away the dynamics that were going on there. He knew that that girl needed someone to talk to." Brother Slattery used the insight of a servant-leader to defuse a volatile situation, and the result was what Greenleaf (1970) referred to as a demonstration of the superiority of compassion over punishment.

Ted illustrated the Christian Brothers' dedication to the marginalized members of society. Ted recalled that in the early days of STM, the school had only a few classrooms, no cafeteria, and no gym. Ted explained that it was very difficult to motivate and inspire the students because their facilities were woefully inadequate, their sports uniforms were not new or fancy, and they didn't often win. Ted recalled that the football team had an important football game coming up and student morale was low. The faculty decided that the team needed a pep rally. Unfortunately, there was no place in the building large enough to accommodate the entire student body. The principal, Brother MacIntyre, gathered the students in the faculty lounge. Ted fondly recalled that Brother Slattery got up on a table in the staff room and led the entire student body in singing the school song. Ted pointed out that Brother Slattery was able to inspire school spirit in a group of students who had previously felt outclassed. Ted said, "I can still remember 'Slatts'; he is a wild guy, a real spirit builder, and a guy who is very concerned with the kids on the margin, the kids having trouble at home. That's what he was there for. When the kids walked out of that pep rally, they were ten feet tall." Brother Slattery was able to build up the students because they believed that his concern for them was real. Even though Brother Slattery was over the top in his actions, there was nothing disingenuous about the message that he was sending to the students: He truly believed in them. Greenleaf (1970) noted that when a servant-leader has firmly established a context of people first, "the right actions fall naturally into place" (22).



Like Cass and Ted, Ray related an anecdote that demonstrated a sense of responsibility toward marginalized individuals in society. Ray remembered that when he had to expel a troubled student, he always felt as if the community had given up on the student on some level. Ray said he thought that the great irony was that the expelled student often needed the school more than anyone else. Ray observed that supporting marginalized students was absolutely necessary, and he noted that some people shy away from the responsibility of caring for the marginalized because it often entails a substantial emotional investment. Ray remembered a student whom he counseled when he was at All Hallows in the Bronx. The student was involved in gang activity, and Ray was helping him work through some of his personal problems. Ray remembered the emotional investment that he had made in the student, building trust and trying to help the student make better choices. One Friday, Ray learned that the student had been shot in the head. "I was so devastated by that experience," said Ray. "That was challenging for me." Ray noted that he found consolation in the idea that there were a lot more troubled and marginalized kids who needed help and a lot more lives that he could affect in positive ways. Ray reasoned that helping marginalized students has a lot more positives than negatives. Greenleaf (1970) observed that exceptional servant-leaders realize that there is both good and bad in the people that they serve, but a servant-leader is aware that an effective leader "must be close to both the bitterness and goodness of life to be fully human" (24).

One of the tenets of an Edmund Rice Christian Brother education is promoting ministries that work with and for the materially poor. During the interview process, each of the Brothers expressed how strongly he believed in the importance and relevance of missionary work and Christian outreach initiatives. At STM, Cass was instrumental in raising money for missions and for school capital campaigns. Cass said he thought it was important for students to give to missions because the practice of making charitable donations is a fundamental aspect of Catholic faith formation. Rather than the amount contributed, it is the habit and the action of giving that are important. Cass suggested that for students, "There is nothing like that personal experience of helping and giving and the experience of personal witness that they can give to others." Greenleaf (1970) agreed that the personal experience of serving others was central to developing servant-leaders.

Hugh identified missionary work as a core value of the Christian Brothers' congregation. Hugh suggested that the immersion experience of



missionary work is truly transformative. Hugh explained, “Missionary work has a tremendous impact on students because it opens their eyes to a much bigger world. Hopefully in doing that it opens their eyes to a much bigger God.” Greenleaf suggested that servant-leaders internalize outside problems and find ways to find peace within themselves so that they can serve others with joyful hearts. Greenleaf (1970) observed, “Joy is inward, it is generated inside. It is not found outside and brought in. It is for those who accept the world as it is, part good, part bad, and who identify with the good by adding a little island of serenity to it” (25).

The lived experiences provided by the Brothers regarding their work for and with the poor and the marginalized directly align with Greenleaf’s (1970) assertion that a servant-leader must always focus on the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged.

Summary

Even though the personal experiences of the Brothers varied greatly, their stories indicate that many of the values, beliefs, and behaviors ascribed to the Christian Brothers align directly with Greenleaf’s (1970) four defining characteristics of a servant-leader. With great passion and in amazing detail, the Brothers related narratives and first-hand accounts of their servant-first dispositions, of their undying commitment to the growth of people, of their inspirational style of service, and of their deep personal devotion to the poor and the marginalized.

CONCLUSIONS

This study focused specifically on how the Christian Brothers’ beliefs, behaviors, and lived experiences were expressed within the context of Greenleaf’s (1970) four characteristics of a servant-leader: a servant-leader is a servant first, is committed to the growth of people, inspires others to lead, and helps the poor and the disadvantaged. The inductive analysis of the lived experiences of the Christian Brothers who participated in this study revealed that the self-ascribed beliefs and behaviors of the Christian Brothers directly align with Greenleaf’s (1970) four characteristics of a servant-leader.



Discussion of Findings

The narratives and lived experiences of the five Christian Brothers who participated in this study revealed clear areas of convergence with Greenleaf's (1970) four characteristics of a servant-leader. All of the Brothers who were interviewed indicated that the importance of service to others above their own self-interests, of commitment to the growth of people, of inspiring others to serve, and of caring for the poor and the marginalized was a core belief that guided their actions, influenced their belief systems, and informed their decisions. In this section, the findings of the study are discussed within the context of the literature that was reviewed.

Theme 1. A servant-leader is servant first. All five of the Christian Brothers who were interviewed indicated that serving others was the most important teaching gleaned from their formal training as Christian Brothers. All of the Brothers indicated that they felt a strong call to serve others, and they all revealed that service to others is the core belief that influences their actions and informs their decisions.

Just as Greenleaf (1970) envisioned, the Christian Brothers revealed themselves to be servant-leaders who seek not to be served, but to serve. The interview data indicate that the Christian Brothers are caring and empathetic servant-first leaders who, as Greenleaf described, use every available opportunity to help and to serve others.

Greenleaf (1970) contended that a servant-leader's devotion to his home community and to his followers is "a mark of true greatness when it is genuine" (10). The Christian Brothers' narratives indicated that they are servant-first leaders who do not rely on traditional hierarchical leadership paradigms in their roles as leaders. The Christian Brothers represent what Greenleaf called the "little people" (10): visible, approachable, human leaders who are committed to those whom they serve. Time and time again, the Brothers provided examples of the humanistic approach that is characteristic of their unique style of servant-leadership. The Brothers used terms such as "the human element" and "the human touch" to describe their leadership disposition.

Theme 2. A servant-leader is committed to the growth of people. All five of the Christian Brothers demonstrated commitment to the growth of people. The findings clearly show that the Christian Brothers' servant-leadership disposition is, as Greenleaf (1970) indicated, predicated on serving others. The experiences of the Christian Brothers indicated that for them, service to others



is much more than an emotional endeavor; it is a moral imperative characterized by the unconditional concern for the well-being of others (Greenleaf).

Spears (2005) noted that servant-leaders recognize the inherent value of people. Spears also contended that servant-leaders have a tremendous responsibility to do everything they can to facilitate the growth of their followers. All of the interviewees indicated that they felt an obligation to help the people whom they serve to become better people.

De Pree (1990) noted that a true servant-leader is able to affirm, counsel, and support followers in a way that helps the followers become stronger, freer, and more autonomous. Each of the Brothers validated De Pree's theory that commitment to the growth of people is grounded in relationship-building. The Brothers' stories revealed their commitment to the growth of people through relationships based on respect. Many of the Brothers also felt obligated to help students realize the boundless potential that was inside them and that their lives are gifts from God.

Greenleaf (1970) wrote, "The servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects" (10). All five of the Brothers indicated that they always tried to accept people for what they are: children of God. The Brothers revealed themselves to be empathetic servant-leaders who reserved judgment on people's character and refused to dismiss people on the basis of bad behavior. As a result, the brothers have earned the trust and respect of their followers and have truly helped people grow taller.

According to Greenleaf (1970), servant-leaders ensure that those who are being served become healthier, wiser, freer, and more likely themselves to become servant-leaders. In different ways and through innumerable examples, the Christian Brothers interviewed proved that they are committed to serving their followers in a way that brings out the best in people.

Theme 3. A servant-leader inspires others to serve. Kelley (1998) suggested that servant-leaders who are committed to the growth of people actually create followers who are inclined to become servant-leaders themselves. Kelley further explained that followers who are accepted, supported, nurtured, and affirmed by their servant-leaders grow into self-sufficient individuals who are more likely to become servant-leaders.

All five of the Christian Brothers interviewed told personal stories about how their own Christian Brother mentors inspired them to become servant-leaders. The Brothers identified many values espoused by their Christian Brother mentors, along with personality traits exhibited by their Christian



Brother teachers and coaches, that impressed and inspired them. The Brothers also indicated that the examples of servant-leadership they observed in their Christian Brother mentors made them aware that servant-leaders are responsible not only for empowering their followers, but for inspiring their followers to become servant-leaders themselves.

Greenleaf (1970) contended that a servant-leader is a credible person, the type of mentor who earns the trust of others by modeling honesty, integrity, and competence. Greenleaf identified a servant-leader as a person with a clear leadership vision and excellent communication skills, a charismatic person who can model the way for followers and inspire them to carry out a shared vision. The Christian Brothers who participated in this study affirmed that their mentors were competent teachers, skilled coaches, masculine role models, and deeply spiritual men. The Christian Brothers who participated in this study had Christian Brother mentors who articulated an inspiring vision. Frick and Spears (2009) reasoned that servant-leaders inspire others by modeling the core values and behaviors that they want to instill in others. The Christian Brothers also indicated that their mentors generated buy-in when they consistently lived out their core values and beliefs. The fact that the Brothers in this study answered the call to serve others directly supports Greenleaf's contention that servant-leaders inspire their followers to become servant-leaders themselves.

Theme 4. A servant-leader helps the poor and disadvantaged. Greenleaf (1970) noted that the personal experience of serving others is central to developing servant-leaders. All of the Brothers interviewed said that serving the poor was modeled for them from an early age, initially, through Missions collections at Mass. All five also said that as they matured in their faith, they felt an even stronger call to serve the poor and marginalized. Some suggested that caring for the materially poor was perhaps the most important aspect of their vocation as Christian Brothers.

The Christian Brothers provided many powerful examples of their own works of Christian charity, from performing missionary work in South America to working at an inner-city school in the Bronx. The Brothers associated their dedication to the poor with the third essential element of a Christian Brother education: standing in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized in society. The Brothers also reported that charitable work is perhaps the most Christlike endeavor in which any Christian can be involved. They noted that caring for the poor brought them closer to people and made them more aware of their own humanity.



IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Classrooms, playing fields, and gymnasiums have been the settings where the Brothers' servant-leadership dispositions have shined through, but as fewer men have vocations and the Christian Brothers retire from active teaching duties, Christian Brother schools are losing community builders, inspiring teachers, talented coaches, gifted artists, masculine Catholic role models, and living examples of the charism of Edmund Rice.

The Christian Brothers have dedicated their entire lives to serving others. When the Christian Brothers are no longer present, it may be more difficult to find teachers and administrators willing and able to take up the demanding challenge of servant-leadership. It is important for lay teachers and administrators working in Christian Brother schools to understand the values that have shaped the Christian Brothers' unique style of servant-leadership. It is equally important that these same teachers, administrators, and coaches continue to emulate the charism of Edmund Rice and model the servant-leadership disposition of the Christian Brothers to ensure that the structured, formal mode of transmitting servant-leadership continues long after the Christian Brothers are no longer physically present in their schools. We believe that servant-leadership has made Christian Brother schools what they are today, and that servant-leadership is the only way to ensure that the charism of Edmund Rice continues to be lived out in Christian Brother schools.

Greenleaf (1970) asserted that the ultimate test of servant-leadership is whether it facilitates the growth of others as persons (6). Based on Greenleaf's definition, the Christian Brothers of Ireland are definitive servant-leaders. Over the past fifty years at St. Thomas More Collegiate, generations of students have grown into confident young men and women under the Christian Brothers' tutelage. The Christian Brothers have mentored, healed, and served troubled students in a way that made the students feel special and valued. Greenleaf (1970) observed that people grow taller when their leaders empathize with them and accept them for what they are. Because of the Christian Brothers' unique style of servant-leadership, many STMC students have become more autonomous, have grown as individuals, have been inspired to serve others, and have stood in solidarity with the materially poor and the marginalized. Because of the Christian Brothers' servant-leadership, generations of STMC students have grown taller.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Everett Joseph Adams is a visual arts teacher and Fine Arts Department head at St. Thomas More Collegiate in Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada. Joe is also a high-performance trainer and a varsity football and wrestling coach. He recently completed his master's degree in leadership and administration at Gonzaga University. Joe has been deeply enriched by the experience of teaching and coaching in an Edmund Rice Christian Brother community. He is dedicated to promoting the unique servant-leadership style of the Christian Brothers. Joe would not be able to devote his time to teaching, training, and coaching without the support and love of his wife, Christina, and his children, Sophia and Everett, for whom he is eternally grateful.

Charles Salina is an associate professor at Gonzaga University in the School of Education. He teaches in the Department of Leadership and Administration. Chuck has been a principal at all levels of K–12 education. Using a federally funded School Improvement Grant and in collaboration with Gonzaga University and Sunnyside School District, Chuck served as the “turnaround” principal at the high school from 2010 to 2012, where he used his background in servant-leadership to help create rapid growth in the school's graduation rate. Chuck is currently assisting Sunnyside School District as the Central Office Transformation facilitator. For further information contact Chuck at salina@gonzaga.edu.

Joanie Eppinga has a master's degree in counseling psychology from Gonzaga University and also studied medieval mysticism and literature at the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Oxford, England. She is a freelance writer and editor who specializes in APA and Chicago Manual of Style formats. Through her company, Eagle Eye Editing and Writing



(www.eagleeyeediting.com), she works from a home base in Spokane, Washington to serve clients throughout the world. Her clients include RIT Press, Skyhawks, Nazareth College, Benefit Comply, the federal government, and doctoral students and professors at Gonzaga. Additionally, she had the honor of acting as copy editor for several volumes of *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*. She particularly enjoys conducting interviews with small- and large-scale social activists, some of which have been published in *Sojourners* and the *Journal of Hate Studies*. Eppinga has been a devoted practitioner of the martial art of aikido for nineteen years.