



EMMANUEL EDEH

*Inspiring Twenty-First-Century Africans to Serve-First*

—FATHER PETER O. AMAH  
NIGERIA

Edeh (1985) articulated a theory of being as *mma-di*—the good that is. This *mma-di* participates in the absolute goodness of God, who creates and sustains it. Every human being deserves sustenance and to have his/her dignity preserved. To serve the interests of *mma-di* as a priority, a leader devotes his/her energy, resources, and life to prove in theory and practice that each individual, according to Ferch (2003), has “inherent worth, a dignity not only to be strived for, but beneath this striving, a dignity irrevocably connected to the reality of being human” (p. 2). It was with a similar thought process that Edeh launched this unique African philosophical concept that sees the human being as the good that deserves care, sustenance, and service.

By articulating African philosophy through his 1985 book *Igbo Metaphysics*, Edeh revolutionized how and why leaders ought to serve-first their followers’ interests. Why should they do so? Because each one is created as the good that participates in the absolute good (*Chineke*) that created him/her. How should they do so? Because in the human’s dignity as *mma-di* the natural craving for continuous sustenance from his/her creator comes first, and then his/her subsequent interdependent sustenance with fellow creatures follows. This understanding of being is fundamental to the way Edeh serves as a leader, which is why he is creating a niche in the history of African leadership philosophy.

In this article, I will evaluate the unique leadership of an ordinary African man, Father Edeh, in terms of his style of empowerment, what he has achieved or failed to achieve, and whether he reflects the seemingly lost leadership characteristics identifiable with the true African—a leadership that was based on putting the people’s interests first, or serving-first. To do this, I will examine a relevant theoretical framework that includes a brief



survey of African history, philosophy, and leadership motivation, as well as Edeh's life and leadership options, including leadership and reconciliation; leadership and empowerment; leadership, charity, and effective practical results; and leadership and the African mindset. I will ask the question, Why serving-first? and examine Love of Power of Love (LoPoL); I will conclude by evaluating whether Edeh is generating a generation of super-servants.

#### BRIEF HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, AND LEADERSHIP MOTIVATION

In the animal kingdom, some leaders serve through their willingness to lay down their lives for the sake of others. In 1985, my father was hunting wild pigs in a virgin forest about ten miles away from Okpo village. He quickly realized that the leader of the swine was combing the territory in protection of more than a dozen others. As it moved, it surveyed the territory by standing tall in the front, at the back, or beside the swine, depending on where it sensed a predator. As a hunter, my father argued that the leader of the swine was often the victim of his bullet. He wondered what an animal sees in others to warrant doing whatever it takes to save them, at risk of its own life.

The rhetorical question that is fundamental to me is, "What about the African human kingdom?"—especially in areas where the leader is not effective and legitimate. As of 2011, illegitimate leaders pervade many African nations, and it does not take a soothsayer to know that ousting them is often a Herculean task. In the past, Diop (1987) argued, an illegitimate and ineffective African leader brought about the socioeconomic and religious deterioration of his people (p. 61) and, therefore, the wrath of the gods. This means that the illegitimate leader (*Eze*) had to die so that the people would survive. Because this philosophy is antiquated, corruption, mismanagement, lack of accountability, insecurity, and instability, practices traditional Africa would not have tolerated, are common among many African leaders (Hassett & Shapiro, 2005).

Although the outcry against African loss of identity and leadership arises, and the youth in some African countries dethrone their contemporary leaders, very few emerging African leaders champion Greenleaf's servant-leadership model in the continent through their commitment to serving the interests of the *mma-di*, a cause greater than self. Such leaders as Edeh offer hope and courage. This is how Joy Njoku Kelechi, a student of Madonna University [which was started by Father Edeh] from the republic of Gabon, put it: "We African youth have not lost our destiny in spite of certain of our



leaders.” She added, “I am inspired by Father Edeh’s persistence in things. He lets us know that as Africans we are endowed with potentials, that we can let the world know that we believe in ourselves and we can do great things in the world.” She further argued that “Father Edeh has set up a standard and shown to the world what Africans are capable of doing” (personal interview, March 14, 2011). Edeh’s achievements, his leadership principles, and his philosophy are outstanding in kind and degree.

Having directly experienced the aftereffects of the Nigerian civil war, Edeh established a Center for Peace, Charity, and Reconciliation, which has liberated and continues to liberate millions of people from all walks of life. In addition to his relentless efforts to liberate and uplift the seemingly hopeless situation of individual, family, and community life in war-torn tribal Nigeria, Father Edeh generated effective practical charity for the poor and instigated the Madonna International Charity Peace Award to encourage, promote, and empower others who serve causes greater than that of self.

Edeh (2009) affirmed that an award given to individuals with charitable hearts “acts as a re-enforcement which spurs them to undertake more charitable works...[and] they feel empowered to carry on even more with their charity works in the society to touch the grass-roots” (p. 22). To perpetuate this charity and leadership mission, Father Edeh founded many primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions as well as religious organizations that continue to respond to the greatest challenge of Africans and non-Africans of the twenty-first century. Chief Ibekwe (2011) observed, “He instilled in us what it means to serve-first the greater need of others with all we have, without exception, even at the expense of the quality of our lifestyles, for the sake of *mma-di*” (personal interview, March 15, 2011). Edeh’s singular philosophical concept of each human person as *mma-di*—the good that is—characterizes his attitude toward all humans, including the socioeconomically marginalized. With this stance, Edeh gradually started changing the leadership mindset of Africans from the ground up.

To lead, for Edeh, is first to understand who is being led and to serve his or her interests. Each follower—rich or poor, sick or healthy, male or female, young or old, black or white, educated or illiterate—must be seen and recognized as possessing an ontological value and a dignity that must be adequately served-first. A leader’s comprehension of every human as *mma-di* radically reawakens the nature-oriented empathy, which is the ability to understand and care for other people’s feelings and their needs, as well as having a commitment to respectfully and unconditionally serve their dignity



in humility. If, as Edeh explained in *Towards an Igbo Metaphysics* (1985), God could serve-first human interest by creating, saving, and sustaining the human, then, Edeh exclaimed in conversation, “how much more my unworthy self” should do the same (personal communication, March 22, 1911).

When asked what inspires father Edeh’s servant-heart, Ezeora stated, “I think it is his philosophy of life, that [the] human is basically good and created by God who cares for him/her. So far as God cares for [the]human, we should complement it by caring for our fellow human.” Ezeora and Ibekwe further affirmed that Edeh’s care for the poor and the less privileged have made him known across the country as a servant (personal communication, March 14, 2011). As Edeh explained, “If we truly understand who a human being is as *mma-di*, we will do whatever it takes to serve one another’s interests first before self” (personal interview, April 4, 2011).

#### EDEH’S LIFE AND LEADERSHIP OPTIONS

Born on May 20, 1947, in Akpugo, Enugu State, Nigeria, Father Edeh considered himself “a child of destiny” because he was born during an eclipse. Edeh insisted that he “believes in possibilities,” because it took his faithful and awe-inspiringly generous mother sixteen years of childless marriage to conceive, and she gave birth to him on an extraordinary day. To be born is to be given a free mandate: to be and to make an impressive difference in the lives of others. This is without exception true in the leadership arena. Everyone, according to Edeh, has unique birth circumstances known and told or untold by his/her mother.

The uniqueness of a person’s birth into life is evident in the dignity of his/her being created as *mma-di*. Thus, whoever is beckoned to or given the unique privilege to serve through conscious leadership choice should be willing to die first (Mandela, 1994, p. 13) so that even the least privileged follower might live. This is possible because an effective leader, a servant-first, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Corazon Aquino, Torti Ufere Torti, Desmond Tutu, Emmanuel Edeh, Abraham Lincoln, and so forth, understands the primordial dignity and value of every human person entrusted into his or her service and does whatever it takes to improve each person’s lot.

To improve service to the followers, Laub (2005) presented a table of variables that is consonant with Edeh’s philosophy of being as *mma-di*. These variables are congruent with Edeh’s leadership principles that model the servant-leadership exploratory voyage. They include a servant-leader’s valuing





people, developing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, and sharing leadership. Each of these attributes will be discussed below.

### *Valuing People*

Valuing people is an integral part of Edeh's vocation. Because his thinking and actions are analogous to his concept of *mma-di*, Edeh (1985) argued that being, which is *mma-di* (the good that is), is possible due to the creative force he attributes to the absolute good (God-*Chukwu*) who continuously creates (*Chineke*) and sustains (*Osebuluwa*) in perpetuity (pp. 100–101). Thus, the vertical dimensional relationship between the “absolute good” and “the good that is” must be reciprocated in the horizontal relationship among the people (*mma-di*)—an indication that there is potential for goodness in every human person that must be mutually sustained.

According to a 400 level Madonna medical student, Tobechukwu, from the U.S.,

If you want to know what it means to value people and to appreciate the basic goodness of being, come to Elele and see all classes of people rich and poor, sick and healthy, old and young, married and single, physically and mentally challenged living in the same compound with Edeh, who amazingly serves everyone's dignity. (Personal communication, March 14, 2011)

Edeh trusts and believes in the people's intrinsic potential and empowers them to rise above their limitations. He spends hours in consultation; he listens actively and empathically without judging anyone. He imagines a caring God (*Osebuluwa*) holding fragile beings on His palm in sustenance and then commissioning everyone to care for each other accordingly. Sister Doris said,

To build and fund a non-for-profit tertiary institution in Africa for the mentally and physically challenged is a rare venture, yet Edeh is the first and only one that has done so particularly in Nigeria by establishing Osisatech College of Education and Polytechnic. (Personal communication, March 17, 2011)

### *Developing People*

Because every *mma-di*, for Edeh, is endowed with potential, relentless effort, each should be made to develop it to full capacity. Sister Doris



affirmed, “Father Edeh is not for half-baked.” For him, “The good that is has to fully manifest. In building many primary, secondary, and tertiary schools beyond what anyone has ever accomplished in Nigeria, he provides opportunity for learning and growth” (personal communication, March 22, 2011). With Edeh’s emphasis on the inseparability of effective education from discipline and moral ethics, as seen in Hernandez (2009), he champions the cause of appropriate behavior.

As Hernandez (2009) further stated, “I always had big dreams for my life” (p. 309). Similarly, Edeh emphasizes his relentless efforts and unyielding self-discipline in pursuing with tenacity whatever dreams he intends to realize. This is because nothing worth having, as the saying goes, comes easy. According to Deborah, a student at Madonna University,

Father founder [or father Elele as he is fondly called] tells us that we are special, unique, endowed, and capable of succeeding in anything that is good. [He is] constantly telling us that we can do anything, be anything, achieve this or that, be the best surgeon in the world, the best aeronautic engineer, the best teacher, the best chef, the best researcher, the best president in the world and by so doing empowers us to daily strive for the best. (Personal communication, March 14, 2011)

Edeh inspires people to work hard in resolute commitment until effective results are produced. For him, the essence of discipline is relentlessness in the pursuit of good, and there is no giving up on the *mma-di*.

### *Building Community*

Edeh (1985), in line with Rodney (1990) and Amah (2009), asserted, “My concept of community here must be characterized as a life community, that is, a societal set-up in which there is animate and intimate face-to-face interaction” (p. 56). Edeh argued that a community cannot be built in isolation; otherwise, people will seldom grow beyond their individuality. What he envisioned twenty-five years ago is gradually becoming prevalent: a society sometimes characterized by stress, loneliness, boredom, and meaninglessness. A challenge that is being lamented, for example, in some American schools and workplaces, is that two students or workers in the same class or office sometimes prefer to speak to each other on the phone or via text messages rather than have intimate face-to-face conversations.

When taking a closer look at all Edeh’s endeavors, one quickly becomes aware of his emphasis on interpersonal interdependence and collaboration,



as well as his practice of valuing the differences of others, which testify to his effective leadership model, which is predominantly outreach-oriented (Pilipino Peters, personal communication, March 14, 2011). Mike, who lives in a village where one of the Madonna University campuses was built, stated, “When a university is built in your community and your village unemployment is reduced to the lowest denominator, you will realize what it means to build a community and how Edeh single-handedly has transformed many villages” (personal interview, March 24, 2011). Once Edeh comes to a town, its people are empowered and a more vibrant community is unleashed. When two Akpugo teenagers were asked how they felt about Edeh’s university being newly built and inaugurated in their community, they replied in their local dialect with a rhetorical question: “*Onwere onye ihe oma so nso?*” This is translated as, “Is there anyone who abhors good?” In other words, every good person/community appreciates what is good, and their community is not an exception. They too appreciate having been empowered to build a vibrant community with all the benefits that come from Edeh’s university.

### *Displaying Authenticity*

Father Edeh is real and down-to-earth. He is so open and willing to learn from experts and amateurs that he goes out of his way to invite critics to evaluate his leadership style to enable him to improve his service to humanity—*mma-di*. Imagine a man with a multimillion-dollar establishment, who has neither material ownership nor his name on the institution’s documents, a rare display of authenticity difficult to identify in the modern capitalist society. By behaving in this manner Edeh maintains exceptional integrity and trust.

### *Providing Leadership*

Ferch (2005) argued that there are few people in the world whose leadership models reflect the qualities of a servant-leader. Such leaders as Edeh, who consistently provide quality support to others, in his case for about thirty-three years without recognition, should be acknowledged and honored in the globe to encourage more to serve-first. The interviews conducted and the literature review show that Edeh envisioned the future in the now through his philosophy of *mma-di* and the practice of effective



charity. He had a vision, took initiative, clarified the goal, and devoted every collaborative effort toward a practical result.

It was Max DePree (as cited in Prosser, 2009) who observed that unseen and unused talent is a waste, as is acknowledged in Thomas Gray's famous verse: "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air" (p. 76). Edeh perhaps understands himself as a midwife in a certain sense who delivers, in many cases, by bringing labor on or assisting in others' delivery of their giftedness. He passionately lives out the truth that the good within every *mma-di* deserves to be brought out of dormancy. That good, when born, shines as a luminary to others and as a catalyst that causes other good reactions to come to light. The world yearns for that intrinsic good within you; your family and community are starving for your hidden talents and potentials; your friends are patiently waiting for you to serve by taking a lead. Would you deny us all your worth, your *mma-di*? For Edeh, "it is a matter of believing in oneself, consistently appropriating the slogan of President Obama, 'Yes, I can,' and then, without further procrastination, start doing it now" (personal interview, April 7, 2011).

Like Thomas Gray, Edeh affirmed that many talents and potentials of *mma-di* are inhibited and often buried, which he considers a big loss for existence. If we understand, he contended, the essence of time and the fact that the time each of us has is ephemeral and, therefore, not enough to deliver all the inborn good within us, we will not need to be reminded anymore to make hay while the sun shines. This is why, he insisted, "I need resounding grace and patient tolerance for laziness, because they cause the universe undeniable fortune and blessedness." According to Arinze,

Father Edeh tells us that everyone might not be equally gifted in one thing, but everyone is uniquely gifted and that we have the responsibility to make a positive mark without succumbing to flimsy excuses that lead to wallowing in self-pity. He further encourages us with the following words: "You can do it, get up from bed—your comfort zone, and take charge of your future; you cannot afford not to be highly productive." (Personal communication, March 22, 2011)

### *Sharing Leadership*

The world's traditional leadership model, characterized by hierarchy or boss-subordinate relationships, is being phased out and replaced by servant-leadership, with managers and workers/followers in collaborative teams



treating each other as equals amid differences in responsibilities. “Today, no one alone can hire, fire, promote, or evaluate an employee. It is done by group process and consensus” (Frick, 2005, p. 7). This process is not alien to Edeh’s practical and effective charity establishment that is designed and organized to work not only for the few most powerful, but for all, with special interest in the world’s socioeconomically marginalized. Thus, his commitment is to sharing status, power, vision, and control to enable him to empower as many others as possible.

Even a cursory look around contemporary Africa unveils a sense of leadership in crisis—a failure to release control. There is a disconnect between the older and the younger generations, as well as a cry for reform—for servant-led organizations, states, and institutions; and for a replacement of superpower mentality with super-servant-leadership. Africa, as a historically endowed super-servant, knows what it takes to share power while serving. One of the greatest weapons of a servant-leader is the ability to serve first, and then, when necessary, to assume formal leadership—and then, without hesitation, to let go of the formal power while remaining an informal servant.

Many contemporary African leaders fail to realize that we are most powerful when we willingly release power. Ancient empires, superpowers, kings, and kingdoms bear eloquent testimony that if we are so powerful that we would not freely or willingly release power even in the face of external human force, nature in time will force us to relinquish that power. Thus, clinging to power is an issue of insecurity and it is becoming an African epidemic, a disease that is dragging her leaders into quicksand. This is because the majority of our leaders are unaware of what it takes to be servant-first and, therefore, never truly know what it means to serve. Nevertheless, “Many more people are willing to have the term servant-leader used to describe them, even if in some cases they do not understand fully the implications of such a descriptor” (Prosser, 2009, p. 74). They are afraid to let go of power because the reality of becoming a powerless follower evokes a deep fear in them. In contrast, a servant-first who becomes an effective leader looks forward to becoming a productive servant again. And this fact, while eluding many, is what a few people, such as Mandela and Tutu, represent in Africa.

Some of Father Edeh’s writings and practices, as aforementioned, embody and exemplify these variables that characterize a servant-leader (Amah, 2009, p. 34). Ezeora stated,



You know in administration, you have to have a standard. He [Edeh] believes in maintaining his standard. That is why wherever you see him collaborating with anybody; he likes to look on the standard and he wants everybody to follow the standard. He himself will try to follow it. (Personal communication, March 14, 2011)

Ezeora gave an example to buttress his point when he said, “For instance, wherever we go he introduces me as the superior of his congregation and he expects me [rather than himself] to do things as the superior. He doesn’t abuse power himself. If you come to Madonna University, [you will find that] he has appointed the vice chancellor and so many others. He allows and trusts them to run the university” (personal communication, March 14, 2011). Sharing power and releasing control are two of Edeh’s administrative priorities.

#### LEADERSHIP AND RECONCILIATION

In his book *Peace to the Modern World*, Edeh (2007) responded to many years of Nigerian “civil war, religious misunderstandings among various groups” resulting in “sporadic fighting, destruction of lives and properties, ill-feelings” in family and community land disputes (p. 83) with his establishment of a peace and reconciliation center in Elele. He argued that “peace and reconciliation were badly needed to heal the wounds and divisions” (p. 83) of people with broken hearts. This center for peace and reconciliation has “recorded over 6.8 million settled cases of disputes and quarrels” (p. 60) from 1985 to 2005. As of 2011, approximately twelve million cases have been resolved. It is also important to know that many of these cases were handled in civil courts without any effective results and lasting peace being achieved until they ended up in Elele.

The following narrative is a typical example of peace and reconciliation in action, of Edeh’s method in a nutshell: Mr. Oliver was assassinated and families and friends were pointing accusing fingers at each other. The police were alerted after the assassination, and although they carried out an investigation, there was no suspect, no arrest, no prosecution. This situation heightened the mutual suspicion of everyone related to Oliver. Although it was the custom for the entire family to arrange the funeral together, Oliver’s family shunned his wife and in-laws during the arrangement. As a result, the wife arranged for an indefinite suspension of the funeral.



Mrs. Oliver was accused by her brother-in-law of witchcraft. According to her brother-in-law, "The trouser of my brother was cut off and perhaps used for diabolical rituals and that is the reason why we wanted to terminate her marriage with Oliver; and 11 days later, he was shot dead." The argument was that Oliver's wife had planned the assassination because of her in-laws' plan to terminate her marriage—an allegation she vehemently denied.

As the narrative went on, Edeh listened actively and empathically with frequent affirmation of their feelings. In a nonjudgmental approach, he listened to Oliver's brother recount his bitter experiences with his sister-in-law, who had reported him to the police for menacing and attempting to kidnap her. In defending herself against this accusation, Mrs. Oliver gave a detailed explanation of her husband's involvement with a piece of land he had bought and the subsequent legal battle that arose. She said she was not aware of the five plots of land her husband had bought and the circumstances surrounding his assassination. She felt sad to discover she was suspected of murder by some of her in-laws.

Mrs. Oliver works as a nurse for the Shell Oil Company. Her work schedule was such that she routinely came back home before her husband. When he was much later than usual in coming home, she recalled, she phoned her husband's secretary to ask about his whereabouts and heard the woman exclaim, "He is dead!"

Overwhelmed with uncertainty and the shock of losing her husband, Mrs. Oliver left home the following morning in search of him. On her way back, one of her in-laws looked her in the eye and said, "We found him dead, and he is in the mortuary at Isienu." To be sure, Mrs. Oliver asked to be taken to the mortuary, where she confirmed her husband's death. Because she did not give her consent for the funeral arrangement, arguing that her husband "is not a chicken that they will assassinate and bury the same week," she ordered that the body be transferred to Shell's hospital custody, where she could monitor his corpse as a staff member. Becoming aware of this new development, one of her in-laws said, "If we had known, we would have taken him where you would not have found him."

While in the Shell mortuary, Miss Oliver inquired about what had happened to her husband. Oliver's friend told her that he had been shot because of the plot of land he'd bought, the fate of which was not yet settled in court. He had gone to work on that fateful day and had last been seen by his secretary and staff members at 12:30 p.m. He had left the office and told them he



was going to see the landlord regarding the plot of land. On getting there, he was shot dead. It was the eyewitness who reported the incident.

Many of the family members who wanted to speak during the reconciliation panel were given the opportunity. One of them, an accountant who had lost his job, said he was also accused of plotting the assassination in order to claim part of Oliver's money and property. He too vehemently denied having had anything to do with it. Oliver's friend also said, "A woman that is related to Oliver told me his wife killed him. I have known this woman [Oliver's wife] for seven years or more before her marriage. She didn't kill Oliver." Many others also spoke.

When all who wanted to do so had had the opportunity to speak, Father Edeh responded,

All of you have come here today and you are here to make peace, and we will commend all these things into God's hand. Homicide is a big thing and when it occurs there is often confusion regarding who committed the crime. You have all laid your complaints and God will take absolute control of the situation.

Edeh further declared:

It is God that brings people here in Elele. It is the Lord's doing. If God brings you here, know that God had already decided to help, bless you, and make peace to reign. Having finished saying your problem, I would like you to calm down and seek the face of God. So come out and take oath before God.

At that time, Oliver's wife, her in-laws, and everyone directly involved with the case was given an opportunity to take the oath with two hands on the Bible, saying:

I confirm before God that I am not a party to the killing of Oliver, I didn't kill him, I did not participate in it, I did not arrange it, and I will not do such a thing in my life. If what I am saying is a lie, let God kill me.

This oath takes precedence over forensic evidence, DNA, psychotherapy, and the criminal investigation that could not help to determine who the culprit was.

After taking the oath, they all agreed to hand over everything to Jesus the Savior, who had brought them to Elele to find peaceful tranquility. Edeh insisted that God would bring the culprit to task, a belief shared by many who think that Edeh has supernatural power, whether for good or for ill,





and that anyone who takes a false oath in front of him will be struck down. Edeh maintained, “It is not any of you that committed that disastrous crime because the guilty one cannot show up in Elele to take an oath [lest he/she be struck down by God]. Therefore, whoever goes against this reconciliatory agreement would have to contend with God.” He also told them to share Oliver’s property amicably according to the deceased’s will. In the absence of a will and in anticipation of potential conflict, Edeh told them, Elele would come in and share the property equitably. At the end of the reconciliation ceremony, a sign of peace was introduced. Everyone participated as Edeh gave his final blessings with the sign of the cross.

This case had been in court for more than a decade with counterlitigation and without resolution. Those involved spent their savings with no guarantee of satisfaction. This case was eventually settled in Elele without financial cost to the parties involved, who buried the hatchet as they enthusiastically embraced each other. The police and the court were notified about the character of Elele’s renown in reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable opposites.

This narrative represents a common occurrence in African culture. There are many similar cases in which individuals or families have spent their life savings in civil lawsuits that are sometimes beyond the expertise level of those involved. Even after court rulings and counterlitigation, the people concerned resort to bearing grievances and engaging in diabolical warfare against one another without achieving the peaceful negotiation sought. This is why Edeh’s dialogical method of administering an oath as a means of ensuring lasting peace and understanding in this part of the world, regardless of certain theological questions about validity, is greatly appreciated.

Edeh provides services free of charge so that advantages of status or monetary influence are eradicated to give way to mutual dialogue, fair play, understanding, forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation. He does so because, as Ferch (2005) put it, “Meaningful dialogue gives rise to the forces that unhinge the way we harm each other, opening us towards a more accepting and empathetic understanding of one another”; and in this landscape, Ferch (2005) continued, “the retributive justice represented by the legal system in mediating familial and professional conflicts is replaced by the idea of the community of forgivers, people with the foresight and vision to build a just and lasting reconciliation” (p. 107). This process draws us into a crucible from which we “emerge more refined, more willing to see the heart of another” (p. 97) and, therefore, to promote the basic cause of *mma-di* as championed by Edeh.



## LEADERSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT

Spears (2009) noted the distinction between servant as leader and leader as servant and applauded Greenleaf's thoughtfulness in titling his essay not *The Leader as Servant*, which makes common sense, but *The Servant as Leader*, a notion that is seemingly irreconcilable with historical leadership experience. Spears called it "a truly radical idea!" (p. 3). This radical idea essentially contains all it takes to empower a would-be effective leader. While many leaders-first claim to be servants of their followers, and perhaps rightly so, the servants-first become leaders beyond the ordinary. They, while serving, create an environment that creates, in Greenleaf's words, people who are "freer, wiser, truer, more autonomous...less likely to be deprived," and more likely to produce further servant-leaders who are the rising tide that lifts all boats (p. 4).

Father Edeh is a rising tide lifting many boats within and beyond Nigerian shores. His early life was characterized by poverty, hard work, subsistence farming, ground tilling with hoes and other local farm tools, manual bricklaying, a generous but poor mother, years of education in a foreign nation, being destitute and starved in isolation, and so forth. All of these hardships furthered his resolve to lift up the conditions of *mma-di*.

Returning to Nigeria from Chicago with a PhD in metaphysics, Edeh found many bright opportunities awaiting him. According to a doctor and nun who is also an administrator of the Madonna teaching hospital founded by Edeh, when asked where he would like to work—with teaching in the university, working in well-established parishes, and other high-profile jobs as options—"Father Edeh replied, 'Assign me to a place no one would like to go'" (Yves, personal communication, March 22, 2011). This was an unusual request; it aroused curiosity among his superiors and peers regarding Edeh's self-esteem. Edeh reported:

I learned as a child to do things that others were unwilling to do; often-times, as human, we like to pick and choose the most comfortable ministries instead of meeting the real needs in the church and the society. To be successful, sometimes you must be willing to get out of the comfort zone, take a faithful risk, and set the example. (Personal communication, March 22, 2011)

Also, he acknowledged that "there were times when I was unwilling to clean the mess in the nursery, but I knew it was my responsibility and I learned my lessons in humility, sometimes in a hard way" (personal communication, March 22, 2011).



Edeh was sent without a dime to a remote parish of about twenty-five relatively poor families in a remote village called Elele, in south Nigeria. He started life from scratch. He fed himself and a few others from his farm and built his rectory with his hands through self-directed labor. According to personal testimony from Arinze, Williams, Umoh, and Nwachukwu, and in line with Frances, Beatrice, and Ezeora (2011), Father Edeh is a hardworking and caring man, an inspirer, a giver whose motive lies in creating and sustaining efforts. His resolution and preparedness to serve God are dedicated to caring for humans (group interview, March 22, 2011).

In 1985, Edeh planted the mustard seed in Elele. Using small-scale subsistence farming to sustain himself, he began his mission of serving *mma-di*. No sooner had he started than he experienced the blossoming of God's blessings upon his vineyard. Those who saw the manifestation of his gifts gathered around him in the early stage of the mustard seed. Amid challenges, the seed grew gradually and persistently to be the size of oak tree, providing shade and shelter and lifting many boats. As of 2011, many physically and mentally challenged people, orphans, indigent poor, sick, addicts, and other unfortunates have been healed by God in Edeh's pilgrimage center, freely treated in his hospitals, sheltered in his New Jerusalem building complex, and offered scholarship in his tertiary institutions.

Furthermore, bankrupt and conflicting individuals, families, and communities have been reconciled in his peace and reconciliation commission, offered loans for financial independence, and provided rehabilitation centers and training for subsequent employment in and outside his establishments. Ezeora explained, "Very importantly, he has offered job opportunities to so many people across the nation, thereby making [helping] them to eke out a living" (personal communication, March 18, 2011). These indeed are different areas in which he has empowered millions of people to be freer, more autonomous, wiser, less deprived, and more likely to serve others. By 2020, Edeh asserted,

All these people, together with our morally and academically formed alumni (now 16,000 university graduates attend our annual meeting), who have been serving in various capacity in the world, will team up in mutual collaboration and transform the leadership instability of this nation and curb our societal ills because we are spreading out. (Personal communication, March 22, 2011)

The optimistic servant has a vision and has worked out the method of realizing it.



#### LEADERSHIP, CHARITY, AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICAL RESULTS

Greenleaf (2007) made an interesting observation regarding charity. His wide experience working in corporate America and serving as a board trustee exposed him to the field of giving. He recalled how difficult it was for the trustees to judge the merit of a request and how many meritorious requests were turned down, to the extent that some referred to the process of approving grants as “corrupting work” (p. 32). Cunigim (as cited in Greenleaf, 2007) also observed,

The relatively innocent desire to help is so thinly distinguished from wanting to be the helper. But the latter is capable of all sorts of distortions: wanting to be well known as the helper, wanting to dictate, to paternalize, to manipulate. (p. 33)

Interestingly, the people being described here consider themselves as charitable and their actions virtuous. However, Cunigim warned that there is need for conscious awareness of the danger of distortion. In other words, “a foundation must believe in the potential immorality of giving” (p. 33). Greenleaf went further to argue that being consciously aware of distortion in giving is not enough unless there is interdependent reciprocity between the giver and the receiver. This is so because, for him, there is no “middle ground between arrogance and humility”; the giver must be willing and ready to “receive the gifts of others, whatever they may be” (p. 33).

Father Edeh gives and is open to receiving because of his belief that every human person, *mma-di*, is endowed with great potential and, therefore, has a lot to offer. He respects each person regardless of status or condition. He has gone about his charity ministry for more than twenty-five years without “wanting to be well known as the helper”; otherwise he would have allowed media publicity.

Evidently, Edeh does not only give the needy fish, but most importantly, teaches them how to fish. According to Edeh (2007), “I established a rehabilitation unit in 1986 where people are rehabilitated and introduced into self-help projects and taught how to make little products like various types of powder, pomade, wine, [bottled water, baked goods,] soap, stickers” (p. 10). His overall expectation, according to Ezeora, is that in “the next 100 years the society would be a place where everybody would be happy and everything [opportunity] would be equitably shared between the poor and the rich” (personal communication, March 22, 2011).



From my interviews and observations, it appears Edeh is not necessarily the voice of the voiceless as much as he is, on a small scale, the food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, home to the homeless, work for the jobless, healing to the sick, hope for the hopeless, courage to the weary, shelter to the orphans, peace to those in conflict. He plays these and many other virtuous roles, sometimes on a large scale, because of his faith in and desire to emulate Jesus the Savior. He is a man with goals who is giving, humble, and results-oriented.

#### LEADERSHIP AND AFRICAN MINDSET—WHY SERVING-FIRST?

An Igbo-Nigerian adage says, “While the mother goat chews grass, the kid watches.” Among the richest and the most corrupt of people in Africa are the politicians. Politics in Africa is, as some people put it, a “do or die affair.” There is no point in having a lower-class individual run for political office unless he/she has a wealthy political “godfather” who, upon the individual’s assumption of political office, closes most avenues of transparency and accountability and subjects taxpayers to extortion. This method of amassing wealth through public funds has eaten deep into the societal fabric. Because the government is often ill-prepared to self-examine and bring justice against itself, the corruption escalates, and the younger ones watch. Rather than frown at and condemn the practice, Chris, a student, stated, “I can’t wait to graduate and go into politics to have easy access to the national cake” (personal communication, March 22, 2011). When discussing why someone would seek an opportunity to embezzle public funds (national cake), another student, Paul interjected, “If you can’t beat them, you join them. You either grab the money when given the opportunity, or leave office wretched and rejected” (personal interview, March 22, 2011).

If I were to diagnose the reasons behind the power epidemic in Africa, I would assess it as being a disease of the mind. Such a disease is more dangerous than a physical disease because, as the saying goes, “Words are the symbol of mental experience.” If there is any plan for transforming African leadership, it must begin with transforming the mindset. For too long the kid has been watching, and he/she thinks that the way the mother chews perhaps is the only way to feed and survive.

In 2007, Maxwell summed up his definition of leadership thus: “Leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less” (para. 1). Every leader exerts influence on the followers, whether positively or negatively,



directly or indirectly. Africa is no exception. Here, it is obvious that many leaders have emerged and exerted influence on the people. These leaders are Africans and non-Africans, who led in the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras in Africa. Each of these leaders has directly or indirectly empowered or failed to empower Africans to be autonomous, interdependent, original, and less deprived. As of 2011, Africa is still considered underdeveloped, with a pervasive leadership crisis and her children sometimes treated as second-class in the global family.

Truly inspiring African leaders are few; those who exist stand out as shining stars, although often without national or international recognition. In the quietness of their exemplary style, they serve the best interests of their people; they are ordinary people providing extraordinary service to others. Father Edeh is no exception. It is in line with the spirit of serving-first exemplified by Edeh that Greenleaf (1977) proposed the servant-leadership model as the best option for effective leadership.

What attracted my research interest and inquiry about Edeh's leadership is his choice to humbly hide behind Jesus's popularity rather than to promote himself in the media. Among those of us who grew up in Nigeria, it was common knowledge that Edeh does not seek or allow publicity from cameras, newspapers, or TV shows; he wants neither awards nor recognition. In one of my interviews with him in which I inquired about this phenomenon, Edeh argued that he is fulfilled in serving God in the needy and not in recognition and awards:

Once I am able to influence two or more lives to the better, I am satisfied. And if I am serving and inspiring them to serve and inspire others, I am fulfilled. Thus, I am open to recognition, award, or media if it aids in these objectives. (Personal communication, March 22, 2011)

Because Nigerians know that Father Edeh shies away from cameras and media, many people became curious about why such a rare personality would recoil from publicity. Those who could not fathom the conundrum started the rumor that Father Edeh, though a religious celebrity with a great physique, avoids the camera because he is not as good-looking as some of the stars. On many occasions, he has publicly applied his sense of humor to the topic of his less than good looks. Regardless, he draws millions of people to his mission.

Some saw him as having a larger-than-life personality, as a superhuman. His commitment to liberating people from their fetish objects, voodoo,



or charms, though applauded by many, was found to be suspect by others, who wondered where his power came from and by what authority he eliminated these ancient traditions. But thousands of people who know him personally understood what was behind his objection to media publicity. He did not want his personal popularity and artificial media hype to cloud the handiwork of God.

According to Edeh,

It is not about me, has never been about me, but all about God, doing his work of creation and sustenance of *mma-di*, through available instruments like me. Therefore, I cannot take the glory or allow the media hysteria to promote me to self-importance. (Personal communication, March 22, 2011)

This indeed is the fundamental reason for his lack of interest in accepting awards and media publicity for more than twenty-five years. It took many consulting experts to convince him otherwise. He recently started accepting media, awards, and recognitions for the sake of inspiring a wider audience in and beyond Africa to serve-first the interests of *mma-di*. As an African who considers himself, and truly *is*, a servant of servants, amid its historical connotation, he, I think in line with Greenleaf, deserves CNN's and Nobel's recognition in order to encourage more African servant-leaders to rise up in the twenty-first century.

Africans know what it means to be a leader and a servant through direct or indirect historical experience. Africa led the world prior to Western civilization, and it can still lead the world. It starts with what Greenleaf (1977, p. 13) called wanting "to serve, to serve first." This means, for Africans, going back to and reconstructing her roots, believing in herself again, and reawakening her nature-oriented altruism. Because Africa has done it before and is ever ready to do it again, we have a few ordinary servants who champion the cause of services that reflect the greatness of the precolonial African leadership mindset.

#### LOVE OF POWER OF LOVE (LOPOL)

Edeh made a clear distinction between the love of power and the power of love, and insisted that the latter remains the driving force in his commitment to serving and empowering *mma-di*. Outstanding contributions of Greenleaf in his leadership theory were his practice and writings of empowerment. Greenleaf's concept of empowerment, according to McCollum and



Moses (2009), focused on “creating a work climate in which diverse ideas are both respected and encouraged” (p. 107). Prior to this era, hierarchical organizations built on the military power and control model dominated human leadership institutions. As of 2011, the hierarchical model of command and control has gradually been giving way to a less formal and flexible structure that emphasizes a collaborative and supportive structure, especially in advanced democratic nations. The journey has gone from focusing on developing the financial sector, to developing organizations, to developing persons with the help of Greenleaf’s revolutionary leadership theory (p. 107). This is a major distinction between the servant-leadership model and other leadership theories. When people are empowered, they in turn develop organizations and build the financial sector.

This noble breakthrough in leadership has been subjected to criticism, especially in some business arenas that dismiss the “power of love” as a touchy-feely fantasy that has no base in business entrepreneurship and the rigors of capitalism. The business environment, for Fawell (2006), often exhibits greed, a “dog eat dog, command and control attitude” (p. 404) that is far from the power of love promulgated by Edeh. The business ideology is also evident in much of the modern African political system, where Machiavelli’s notion that the end justifies the means often rules.

Edeh is in agreement with Greenleaf’s (1977) argument that leaders ought to raise the capacity to serve “if a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people” (p. 49). This thinking may be considered odd in a political or market model, but it is a groundbreaking idea capable of making our world a better place. It associates serving-first with the power of love, and leading-first with the love of power.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude this research work is to ask the fundamental question, “Is Edeh generating a generation of servant-leaders?” During the course of this research, I encountered many people who indicated how much influence Edeh’s selfless services to *mma-di* exerted on them and how they have carried out this seemingly irresistible desire to nobly serve others. Edeh’s initiation of the Madonna Peace and Charitable Awards (MPCA) given to individuals with charitable hearts serves as a catalyst that stimulates undertakings into more charitable missions. Furthermore, Edeh has built many





academic, financial, health-related, and religious institutions whose mission is to serve-first the interests of *mma-di* by actively listening, empathically reconciling differences, being present with foresight, developing and coaching colleagues with the spirit of humility, building peaceful communities, and helping to unleash another's giftedness without expecting personal rewards. By so doing, Edeh has gradually started transforming the African leadership mindset at a grassroots level. Because he has exemplified these major characteristics of servant-leadership in his commitment to serving and empowering the interests of *mma-di*, he can be and truly is classified as belonging to the group of world servant-leaders who are inspiring twenty-first-century Africans to serve-first.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter O. Amah is a U.S.-ordained Catholic priest, a leadership consultant, and the founder of Spirit of Sharing Ministry, a nonprofit organization that supports rural community development, children's education, community health projects, and disability care. Amah earned a PhD and two masters degrees, and is originally from Nigeria. He has published books and his major areas of research are transformational and servant-leadership.

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