

More complex than politics

By Edwin Madunagu

be desperately needy. Even with the purest of intentions and love, it would be silly to embark on mass political education and social conscientisation on "empty stomachs". We decided, after a long period of "soul-searching", that it would be necessary to provide something, or create something, in the community - a permanent something that the entire community would enjoy in common - before physically moving there.

At the beginning of 2000, we relocated to the community, having constructed something and established something. The something we constructed was a borehole to provide a source of clean water, free of charge, to members of the community. And the something we established, or rather whose establishment we actively inspired, was a community youth association for collective self-improvement of the youths in particular and the community in general. That was 45 months ago. Today, the borehole is there, well maintained, functioning optimally, and delivering services efficiently. But I cannot say the same thing about the male-female, general development youth association. A partial listing of the problems can be made: Sexism, elitism, selfishness, philistinism and proprietary inclinations. For objective reasons of poverty and unemployment individual members have not been contributing financially to the development of the organisation; but a few have been benefiting, or rather "chopping". Despite the material and ideological input that has been made into the project over the last 45 months, we are still struggling to keep it alive organisationally and materially.

My "popularity" rating in the community

remains as high as ever. Children still greet me "Bettle Sir", although I rested the car in question almost three years ago. More children have since joined the originators of the salute. I am greeted as "Professor", "Doctor", "Chief", "Comrade", "Our man", etc, depending on the group and the expectations, for every salutation carries an expectation - material or otherwise. I report that I always respond to the best of my ability.

It was against this social background that my neighbour confronted Ete Ukpong on the need for her son to "chop" from "the Ibo man". As soon as I overcame my initial feelings, I called a meeting of our household and informed them of my plan to send a four-point response to the woman through a delegation. I listed the four points: First, that Ete Ukpong's offer to the boy Edem was fair and was meant to assist him and his peers, and that we could, if we had wanted to do so, obtain free assistance to do the clean-up. Secondly, that the woman should look back at her own personal experience in life and all the people she had met and all the relationships she had kept, and see if instead of calling me "the Ibo man" it would not have been more appropriate to call me "that mad man" who does what others do not do. Thirdly, why is it that her church leaders who drive on our road with more and better cars, do not care about the maintenance of the road, and would prefer to leave it to "the Ibo man". Finally, that the woman should examine and compare her current relationships with two "Ibo" men: one is the Chief Priest of her church to whom she regularly pays dues, levies and offerings and who is assisted free of charge and in several ways by her children, including Edem, and the other is a neighbour who asks for nothing, but tries to give...

The three-member delegation, which in-

philosophically and politically and generalise the lessons. This piece is one way of doing this.

My family has lived in Calabar continuously since 1976. I myself have lived here almost continuously since then. I may also add that my stay in Calabar has been very active politically and otherwise. Even when I was with *The Guardian* in Lagos, Calabar remained the centre of my politics. My children, for no fault of theirs, cannot speak the Igbo language. I myself do not speak Igbo as first language, but as third - Yoruba and English coming as first and second respectively. My spouse's ancestors, down to her parents, were from this part of the country. But, as I said, I decided to deal with the provocation philosophically and politically, for I saw it as a manifestation of the Nigerian problem at a personal level. To appreciate how I did it, my readers have to be taken one or two steps back.

We moved to this rural community with considerable reluctance; or, to put the matter more correctly, I delayed our movement as long as I could. There was an obvious irony here because, ordinarily, one would have thought that I would be happy to return to rural life. The reason for my delay was a subjective one. In the preceding two decades we had lived in a sub-urban area of Calabar. Here we were ordinarily residents: our house was inconspicuous for its ordinariness; we drove ordinary cars, and we still do; we dressed ordinarily; our domestic life was also ordinary. I was acutely aware that if this relative ordinariness was transplanted into a rural community, it would become conspicuous and different by its newly acquired relative "affluence". Even if we could, it would not be enough to offer material assistance, from time to time, or even continually, to needy members of the community - and every resident appears to

ON Saturday, August 09, 2003, at about 10.30 a.m, I heard a loud commotion outside the gate of our residence located in a rural community in Calabar South Local Government Area. I asked two young members of our household to go out and check out the matter, and then moved away from the gate, to shield myself from further distractions. But my respite did not last for long. The two young women who went out soon came back with a report for the rest of us. I summarise the story.

An elderly member of our household had asked a boy in the community aged 14 years, to invite a few of his peers, then idling away on holiday, to join in cleaning up our short street. The old man promised that the boys would receive some money to "manage" the holiday. The boy - let us call him Edem - asked the old man to name the price. The old man offered something modest. Edem multiplied the offer by four, saying that he knew "Sir" would not mind paying the amount. When the old man refused, Edem went to his mother, next door, and lodged a complaint against Ete Ukpong (Ukpong's father), as the old man was popularly known in the community. On receiving the complaint, Edem's mother, called Eka Edem, shouted: "Ete Ukpong, I want to see you". The man replied: "Eka Edem, I am very busy now: I shall see you, later". But the woman was too annoyed to wait. She rushed at the fragile old man: "Ete Ukpong, what have I done to you that you would not allow my son participate in chopping from the Ibo man?" This was the cause of the commotion which we heard. I was the person referred to by Edem as "Sir" and by his mother as "the Ibo man". Readers can imagine how I felt on receiving this report. But I quickly overcame my feelings and decided to deal with the matter

cluded Ete Ukpong, and two young women, was dispatched about 9.00 a.m on Monday, August 10, 2003. I asked them to dramatise their mission so as to attract as many members of the community as possible. They should deliver their message in the open, in front of the house. The delegation performed excellently. They approached the woman's house in a single file, and this drew everyone that sighted them. More people joined as the mission progressed. The effect was dramatic. Everyone condemned the woman for provoking the "generous" and "quiet" man. The woman herself reacted by blaming Ete Ukpong for causing the whole trouble and then falling on her knees and begging me through the delegation. She did not deny saying what she was reported to have said, but blamed it on Ete Ukpong's manner of approach to her son.

The rally, (for that was what the gathering suddenly became) decided to accompany the woman to our house to beg me. The delegation requested for a little delay to allow them inform me. Of course they knew what my answer would be. I sent them back to the rally with the assurance that no "begging" was necessary; that the woman merely aired her views, and I responded, and the community intervened. The matter has ended. As a demonstration of goodwill I sent a copy of my complimentary card to her with a final reminder that I am Edwin Madunagu, not "the Ibo man".

Last line: Another group of adolescents later did the clean up of the street under a new arrangement reached with Ete Ukpong. The new price was a little higher than what Ete Ukpong had offered to Edem, but much lower than what the boy had demanded. Edem was later sighted participating in the work. But I could not confirm if anything was "dropped" for him.