

BEYOND POPULARITY: DUE DILIGENCE IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP ELECTIONS

A Biblical, Theological, and Policy-Based Framework for Selecting Faithful, Competent, Fair, and Representative Leaders

Abstract

Leadership elections in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church are essential to spiritual growth, organizational integrity, unity, and mission effectiveness. However, elections can be weakened by favoritism, tribalism, personal loyalties, inadequate assessment of candidates, and disregard for established church procedures. This article examines due diligence in leadership elections through biblical principles, Ellen G. White's counsel, the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, and contributions from Adventist scholars. It argues that responsible selection requires careful assessment of spiritual maturity, character, competence, fairness, representation, and accountability. Drawing on Dederen's theological reflection on church authority, Knight's historical analysis of Adventist organization, and Weigley's research on leadership preparation, the article proposes a practical framework for transparent and responsible elections. It concludes that due diligence protects the church's spiritual mission while promoting trustworthy, capable, and servant-hearted leadership.

Keywords: Seventh-day Adventist Church, leadership elections, due diligence, church governance, servant leadership, fairness, representation

1. Introduction

Leadership elections in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are sacred responsibilities through which members identify individuals to serve God, nurture believers, administer church affairs, and advance the gospel mission. Leadership quality influences spiritual growth, stewardship, unity, accountability, and public confidence in the church.

Due diligence refers to the deliberate assessment of a candidate's character, spiritual maturity, qualifications, competence, experience, integrity, and suitability before recommending or electing that person to office. It is not an exercise in finding reasons to disqualify candidates; rather, it is a process of making informed, prayerful, and responsible decisions.

Knight (2001) demonstrates that Adventist organizational structures developed in response to the practical needs of a growing church and its mission. Consequently, church elections should protect both spiritual principles and the organizational arrangements established to advance that mission.

The central question should therefore be: Who is biblically qualified, spiritually mature, competent, fair, and prepared to serve faithfully?

2. Biblical Foundations of Due Diligence

2.1 Spiritual qualifications and character

Exodus 18:21 instructs Moses to select capable individuals who fear God, are trustworthy, and reject dishonest gain. These principles establish four essential standards: ability, spiritual commitment, trustworthiness, and integrity.

Similarly, 1 Timothy 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9 emphasize self-control, faithfulness, sound judgment, good reputation, and responsible conduct. These passages demonstrate that leadership qualifications extend beyond popularity, wealth, education, or social influence.

Candidates should demonstrate honesty, accountability, respect for others, spiritual commitment, and responsible use of authority. Christian leadership does not demand sinless perfection, but it requires a credible pattern of faithfulness, repentance, and spiritual growth.

2.2 Examination before appointment

Paul's instruction that prospective deacons should first be tested (1 Tim. 3:10) establishes a principle of prior assessment. The church should not appoint individuals first and investigate their suitability afterward.

Acts 6:1–7 further illustrates this principle. When concerns arose about the distribution of assistance to widows, the early church identified qualified individuals known for their good reputation, spiritual maturity, and wisdom.

The passage demonstrates the importance of identifying ministry needs, defining qualifications, addressing fairness, involving the community, and selecting leaders who can advance the mission.

2.3 Servant leadership

Jesus taught that greatness in His kingdom is demonstrated through service rather than domination (Mark 10:42–45). Peter likewise instructed elders to shepherd God's flock willingly and without domineering conduct (1 Pet. 5:2–3).

Tan (2025), examining servant leadership within the Adventist context, emphasizes humility, sacrifice, spiritual development, and member participation. This perspective supports the principle that church office is a responsibility to serve rather than a privilege to control others.

Due diligence should therefore consider whether candidates are willing to collaborate, accept correction, develop other members, and place the church's mission above personal ambition.

3. Ellen G. White's Counsel on Leadership Selection

Ellen G. White emphasized careful, prayerful selection of church officers and the importance of following biblical principles in appointments (*Counsels for the Church*, n.d.).

Her counsel challenges hasty elections driven by convenience, popularity, or personal relationships. A vacancy should not justify selecting someone whose suitability has not been adequately considered.

White (1903) also emphasized the importance of developing character and cultivating the abilities needed for responsible service. This principle supports leadership preparation and the development of members' gifts.

Furthermore, White (1909) rejected kingly power in the church and emphasized distributing responsibilities among competent people. She recognized the importance of members having a voice in choosing church officers and of representative participation in denominational governance.

These principles have three implications:

1. Candidates should be selected carefully and prayerfully. Leadership authority should
2. be exercised through service and accountability, not personal domination.
3. The church should identify and develop competent members rather than concentrating responsibility in a small circle.

Due diligence must also protect candidates' dignity. Relevant concerns should be investigated responsibly, without gossip, fabricated allegations, or public humiliation.

4. Church Governance and the Church Manual

The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* establishes procedures for local church organization, elections, and officers' responsibilities (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists [GC], 2025).

Dederen (1995) explains that Adventist church authority is rooted in Scripture and expressed through a representative structure that connects local congregations with the wider church. He presents authority as service and emphasizes the relationship between local participation, church unity, and denominational responsibility.

This understanding discourages both unchecked individual control and disregard for established church order.

The nominating committee's primary responsibility is to recommend suitable candidates through the prescribed process; it does not independently replace the authority of the church body conducting the election. The General Conference clarified this distinction through an amendment to Chapter 10 of the Church Manual adopted at its 2025 Session (GC, 2025).

Due diligence must therefore operate within the current Manual, adopted amendments, and applicable policies. Requirements should not be inferred from outdated editions, personal opinions, or local customs.

Confidentiality, proper handling of objections, fair representation, and the candidate's willingness to serve are essential considerations. At conference, mission, union, and

General Conference levels, the relevant constitutions, bylaws, working policies, and election procedures must also be followed.

5. Assessing Ability and Competence

A common weakness in church elections is assuming that a faithful member is automatically suitable for every office. Although spiritual commitment is essential, different responsibilities require different abilities.

Before considering candidates, the committee should establish the purpose of each office, its responsibilities, applicable qualifications, required skills, and expected time commitment.

Examples include:

Church elders: Spiritual maturity, pastoral care, sound judgment, teaching, and cooperation with the pastor.

Treasurers: Honesty, financial competence, accurate records, confidentiality, and compliance with financial controls.

Sabbath School leaders: Bible study, planning, teaching coordination, and member development.

Youth leaders: Mentoring, communication, program planning, and safeguarding awareness.

Communication leaders: Writing, media literacy, accuracy, confidentiality, and responsible public representation.

Stewardship leaders: Biblical stewardship knowledge, financial education, planning, and integrity.

These are practical considerations, not substitutes for the qualifications specified in the Church Manual.

Weigley (2015), studying transitions into local conference presidency, identified the importance of intentional leadership preparation, mentoring, assessment, and support. Although his research concerns a different organizational level, it reinforces the value of preparing leaders rather than assuming that appointment alone guarantees effectiveness.

The church should distinguish present readiness from future potential. Candidates who need additional training may be developed, while demanding offices should be entrusted to individuals capable of fulfilling their responsibilities.

6. Fairness and Impartiality

Fairness is a biblical obligation. James 2:1–9 condemns favoritism, Proverbs 24:23 warns against partiality, and Micah 6:8 emphasizes justice and humility.

6.1 Tribalism and personal favoritism

In culturally diverse communities, including Kenyan churches, candidates may be favored or rejected because of ethnicity, clan, family connections, or social alliances. Such practices undermine Christian unity and prevent the church from recognizing gifts fairly.

Galatians 3:28 emphasizes unity in Christ, while Revelation 7:9 portrays a redeemed community drawn from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

Committees should establish criteria before considering names, apply the same standards to comparable candidates, and avoid informal agreements that distribute offices according to ethnic blocs.

6.2 Financial influence and factionalism

Financial contributions should not purchase leadership authority. A generous donor must meet the same relevant qualifications as other candidates.

Similarly, elections should not reward personal supporters or punish individuals who have disagreed with influential leaders. Disagreement alone does not demonstrate disloyalty or unsuitability.

Fairness requires reliable evidence, consistent standards, and responsible handling of concerns. Unverified allegations must not be treated as established facts, while substantiated concerns affecting integrity or safety must not be ignored.

7. Representation and Inclusion

First Corinthians 12:12–27 describes the church as one body with many members, each contributing to the whole. Romans 12:4–8 similarly recognizes different gifts and responsibilities.

The nominating committee should consider whether qualified members from different congregations, age groups, professional backgrounds, communities, and ministry areas have meaningful opportunities to serve.

Representation should broaden participation and strengthen the church's capacity to fulfil its mission. It should not replace biblical qualifications or become a rigid quota system unless an applicable policy requires one.

White's emphasis on distributing responsibility among competent people supports the development of a broader leadership base (White, 1909). A church should neither concentrate every important office among a few individuals nor appoint unqualified people merely to achieve numerical balance.

Representation broadens participation, while biblical qualifications protect the integrity of leadership.

8. A Practical Due Diligence Framework

A responsible nominating committee can apply the following steps within the prescribed election process:

1. **Prayer and preparation:** Seek divine guidance and review the church's ministry needs.
2. **Define qualifications:** Establish biblical, practical, and policy requirements before assessing candidates.
3. **Identify candidates:** Consider qualified members beyond familiar or influential circles.
4. **Verify relevant information:** Review appropriate service records, qualifications, experience, availability, and material concerns.
5. **Evaluate fairly:** Apply consistent standards, maintain confidentiality, and allow appropriate clarification of material concerns.
6. **Confirm willingness:** Establish that the candidate is prepared and able to serve.
7. **Recommend appropriately:** Follow the prescribed reporting, objection, and election procedures.
8. **Support elected leaders:** Provide orientation, mentoring, training, and constructive accountability.

Assessment should be based on relevant and reliable information. Gossip, personal dislike, anonymous allegations, and social media speculation are not sufficient evidence. Serious concerns involving abuse, exploitation, or financial misconduct must be handled through appropriate safeguarding and reporting procedures.

The committee may use a structured checklist to assess spiritual qualifications, character, competence, performance, fairness, representation, availability, and policy compliance. Numerical scores, if used for practical competencies, should never override mandatory qualifications or serious substantiated concerns.

9. Common Failures to Avoid

Several practices undermine election integrity:

- Choosing popular individuals without assessing their suitability.
- Making prearranged agreements that undermine impartial consideration.
- Reappointing incumbents automatically without reviewing their service.
- Using rumors or personal disputes to discredit candidates.
- Overlooking emerging leaders and restricting leadership development.
- Allowing influential individuals or committees to bypass established procedures.
- Confidentiality, accuracy, proportionality, impartiality, and accountability should guide the process.

10. Conclusion

Due diligence in SDA church leadership elections combines biblical qualifications, Ellen G. White's counsel, denominational policies, competence, fairness, and responsible representation.

Adventist scholarship reinforces the importance of representative governance, mission-focused organization, servant leadership, and intentional leadership development (Dederen, 1995; Knight, 2001; Tan, 2025; Weigley, 2015).

The church needs leaders whose character can be trusted, whose abilities match their responsibilities, whose conduct reflects Christ, and whose service builds up the body of believers.

The process must be rigorous enough to identify unsuitable appointments, fair enough to protect candidates from prejudice, and inclusive enough to recognize the gifts of the wider membership.

Ultimately, leadership elections are not opportunities to reward friends or powerful individuals. They are opportunities to identify faithful servants who can advance God's mission.

The guiding principle is this: Pray earnestly, examine carefully, evaluate fairly, follow the Church Manual, and elect responsibly.

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