

Church Leadership Elections and Personal interest Interference: Implications for Members' Spiritual Growth and Development in protestant churches in Kisumu County

ONDOO BEATRICE ATIENO¹, DR. AHAYA LUKES OCHIENG², DR. EKWENYE JOHN³

¹PhD Student Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology

²Department Of Social Science Education Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kakamega, Kenya

³Department of Social Science Education Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kakamega, Kenya

Abstract—The Bible provides a spiritual framework for selecting church leaders, emphasizing prayer, integrity, and divine guidance. Church leadership plays a critical role in shaping the spiritual direction, governance, and overall health of Christian congregations. In Protestant churches, leadership elections are often designed to reflect biblical principles such as integrity, service, and divine calling (1Timothy3:1). However, in recent years, there has been growing concern about the infiltration of personal interests and practices into church leadership selection processes. These practices tend to shift focus from spiritual qualifications to popularity, financial influence, and social status. As a result, leadership positions risk being occupied by individuals who may not possess the spiritual maturity required to guide the church effectively. This study examined the extent to which personal interest interferes in church leadership elections and its implication on the spiritual growth and development of members within Protestant churches in Kisumu County. The following were the objectives of the study; to analyze the nature and forms of personal interest interference in church leadership elections, to assess how personal interest affects the selection of church leaders, to evaluate the impact of personalized leadership on the spiritual growth of church members. The study was anchored on Servant Leadership Theory Developed by Robert K. Greenleaf (1970), the theory emphasizes that true leaders prioritize serving others before seeking personal gain or power. Leadership is viewed as a moral and ethical responsibility, focusing on the growth, well-being, and spiritual development of followers. The study adopted a qualitative approach, drawing on existing literature, observations, and insights from church leadership structures in Kenya. It explores how individual behaviors such as campaigning, favoritism, lobbying, and external influence compromise the spiritual integrity of church elections. The target population were 110 church leaders from 3 protestant churches from 3 sub counties in with a sampled size of 99 respondents Kisumu County namely ; SDA Church, Anglican Church, and Christ is

the answer (CITAM).Methods of data collection included Oral interviews, Focused group discussion. Primary data and secondary data was derived from manuals, journals, articles, and newsletters which form the literature review for the study. Findings indicated that personal interest interference in church elections often leads to divisions among members, loss of trust in leadership, and a decline in spiritual engagement. Members may become disillusioned when leadership processes mirror secular political systems, thereby weakening their commitment to spiritual growth and participation in church activities. The study recommends strengthening church policy frameworks, promoting spiritual discernment in church leadership election, and reinforcing biblical principles as the foundation for church leadership.

Key words — election, politics, leadership, bible, church, spiritual growth and development

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

Church leadership elections in Protestant denominations, when driven by personal interest rather than spiritual stewardship, can significantly hinder members' spiritual growth and development, leading to fractured communities, diminished trust, and stunted spiritual maturity. The intrusion of personal agendas—such as ambition for power, influence, or financial benefit—transforms a spiritual process into a political competition, shifting the focus away from the biblical mandate of nurturing faith (Miller, 1978).

Leadership conflict is the clash of personal preferences among the church staff in planning, scheduling, and executing the work of the church. It

also occurs when the congregation expresses dissatisfaction with the conduct or proposed programs of the church staff and, conversely, when the staff criticizes the membership (Adetunji, 2010). Leadership conflict can be understood as a vigorous struggle or disorderly fight to occupy a leadership position by any means possible, even going against the accepted norm or established rules, procedures, or standards. In other words, it is a desire to become a leader, “do or die,” regardless of the conditions. Such conflict is always against the will of the majority (Adetunji, 2010).

According to Maxwell, (2006), everything rises or falls on leadership. Maxwell states that leadership conflict manifests as the clash of personal preferences among church staff in planning, scheduling, and executing church work. Also, it occurs when congregations express dissatisfaction with the conduct or proposed programs of church leadership (Wel, 2025).

The relationship between the Church and politics is a fundamentally problematic topic that has sparked debate throughout Church history and in contemporary politics (McBrien, 1984). Many academics have interpreted the relationship between Christianity and politics in a variety of ways, with some claiming that Christianity supports a certain political ideology explicitly. Leadership conflict is among the most destructive forms of conflict within a church because leadership in religious organizations is often revered, and leadership positions often carry substantial remuneration and benefits (PaanLuel Wel, 2025).

While some religious leaders justify their involvement in personal interest campaigns as a means of promoting good governance, critics argue that this practice undermines the moral authority of religious institutions (Uzochukwu, 2018). One important way Christ demonstrates his leadership model is through his choice of disciples who would continue the work he came to do on earth. Importantly, before sending the disciples to accomplish any mission for him, he ensured that the disciples spent time with him: —Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach (NKJV, Mark 3:14). They have a perfect model for comparison, as they look at the life of Christ vis-à-vis their own life.

In contrast to power, authority is the ability to persuade, command, or exact obedience (Avis, 1992; Rausch, 1989). In some churches, the misconception of authority has led to conflict. Some leaders even use authority to establish themselves as dictators, lording their opinions over the congregation (Maxwell, 1993). Alawode (1989) quotes Osagie O. Imasogie in his book *Managing Crises Within the Church*, arguing that “many people in positions of leadership in our local churches think that their role is to make everybody dance around them as mindless robots whenever they pull the strings”. Such misconceptions of a church leader’s authority have led some churches into chaos and discord. Hence, power and authority in leadership can help suppress or promote conflict (Avis, 1992).

Another remarkable quality to be learned from Christ’s teaching on leadership is service and humility. This teaching of Christ is best understood through the concept of the Sons of Zebedee in Mark 10:35–45. The two brothers presumed that leadership is about occupying a position of greatness, where they would be honoured and served by everyone. However, Christ brought them to a different perspective on leadership. Christ taught that true leadership requires servanthood: —whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant (Mark 10:43–45).

Eims (2008) narrates that it is the responsibility of the church leaders today and their congregants to carry out the mission of God in making him known to the world. Church leaders are responsible for the success or failure of a church. God holds leaders responsible for what takes place in the ranks. It is through responsible and able leaders that God keeps his people in the right direction. Without good leadership the vision and mission of a church cannot be achieved.

According to Wahjosumidjo, leadership in the context of the Bible is considered a task exclusively given by God (Wahjosumidjo, 1992). In the Bible literature, leadership is seen as a calling ordained by God for specific individuals. God specifically selects and anoints these individuals to lead His people. For example, when God chose David as the king of Israel, Samuel’s act of anointing symbolized God’s selection and empowerment of David. Therefore, successful leadership in the biblical context is exemplified by individuals who humble themselves and understand the profound responsibility inherent in this calling.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Church leadership elections in Protestant churches are intended to uphold spiritual values such as integrity, humility, and service. Ideally, leaders are chosen based on biblical qualifications, moral standing, and their ability to nurture the spiritual growth of the congregation. However, there is increasing evidence that these elections are being influenced by personal interest dynamics similar to those found in secular governance systems. This situation presents a significant challenge because it shifts the focus from spiritual discernment to human ambition and competition. Consequently, individuals who are elected into leadership positions may lack the spiritual depth and commitment necessary to guide the church effectively. This can lead to poor decision-making, internal conflicts, and weakened spiritual direction. Despite the importance of this issue, limited research has been conducted on how personal interest interference in church leadership elections specifically affects the spiritual growth and development of members in Protestant churches. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the problem and proposing practical solutions.

1.3. Objectives of the study

- i. To analyze the nature and forms of personal interest which interferes with church leadership elections.
- ii. To assess how personal interest affects the election of church leaders.
- iii. To evaluate the impact of personalized leadership on the spiritual growth and development on church members.

1.4. Research questions

- i What are the the nature and forms of personal interest in church leadership elections?
- ii How does personal interest affect the election of church leaders?
- iii What impact does a personalized leadership have on the spiritual growth and development on church members?

1.5. Purpose of the study

The primary purpose of this study on Church Leadership Elections and Personal Interest: Implications for Members' Spiritual Development in Protestant Churches is to analyze how the pursuit of leadership positions—driven by selfish motivations rather than spiritual calling—contributes to

leadership conflicts, church division, and a decline in the spiritual maturity of the congregation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Protestant churches traditionally emphasize participatory governance, where leaders are elected through congregational involvement. This system reflects biblical models such as Acts 6:1–6, where leaders were chosen based on spiritual qualifications. However, contemporary church elections increasingly mirror secular political systems, with campaigns, alliances, and competition driven by personal interests (NIV, Acts 6;1-6).

Richard Rardin emphasizes that a leader's character is not only crucial to their followers but also holds high value in the eyes of God. According to him, a leader's character is of greater importance to God than the visible behaviors or physical actions (Rardin, 2001).

It could be noted in scripture that the churches established by Apostle Paul were able to reflect the attributes of God in appropriate ways within different cultural contexts due to good leadership empowered by the Holy-Spirit. This can be traced in the book of 1st Timothy and Titus. But the modern Christian Church seems to be departing from the Pauline principles of church leadership and this has greatly affected the growth and survival of church. The level of understanding anticipated from both church leaders and their followers is missing in most cases and this at times results into conflicts in the church (Jayson, 2016).

Church growth has been closely linked with leadership, such that without effective leadership, the ability of a church to achieve sustainable growth is constrained (Muturi, 2009). The church leaders have a responsibility to plan and conduct evangelism, as well as to provide spiritual nourishment to new followers and nurture them to become committed members of their congregations.

Christian leaders must possess a character that reflects Christ, with strong moral values and ethics (Barna, 1997). In the context of Christian leadership, a leader's character plays a crucial role as a factor influencing leadership effectiveness. Character reflects the personal qualities and moral values held by the leader, which are expected to mirror the

teachings and example of Christ. Strong moral values and ethics in the character of Christian leaders involve moral principles found in the Bible and established as moral standards for adherents of the faith.

Character reflecting Christ refers to personality qualities considered in line with the leadership example set by Jesus Christ. This includes love, compassion, justice, perseverance, humility, integrity, wisdom, and loyalty to God's will (Wahjosumidjo, 1992). Christian leaders with a character that reflects Christ are expected to exhibit genuine love towards others, prioritize the interests of others over their own, and practice the moral values contained in the teachings of the Bible.

This assertion is supported by Weems (1993) who posits especially the quality of the pastor's leadership is of great value in the life of the church. Associating success to leadership, Maxwell (2005) argues that "If you want to succeed, you need to learn as much as you can about leadership before you have a leadership position.

This is supported by Robert Greenleaf's servant leadership theory as expressed by Burkus (2010). According to Burkus (2010), the most effective leaders are servants of their people and they get results through whole-hearted attention to their follower's needs. The servant leadership theory emphasizes on collaboration, trust, empathy, and ethics. The assumption of this theory is that if leaders focus on the needs of their followers, the followers will reciprocate through increased team work and be engaged to better performance. The philosophy of servant leadership theory is to meet the needs of the organization and provide a climate for its followers to grow and develop as human beings. This can be realized by valuing people and developing them by providing learning opportunities, modeling appropriate behavior and building others by encouragement(Burkus,2010).

2.1. Nature and forms of personal interest which interferes with church leadership elections.

Early Christian leaders were devoted to Jesus Christ's teachings, with some becoming martyrs instead of seeking glory and power, especially before Constantine's religious tolerance in AD 313. Afterwards, the church gained land, donations, and political influence, gradually leading to corruption.

The priesthood became central to both religious and worldly authority, contributing to the church's decline (Seon, 1996).

Research shows that in some Protestant contexts, leadership positions have been treated as assets to be controlled or inherited, reflecting a shift from spiritual service to institutional power. For example, studies of Protestant churches in South Korea reveal that leadership succession is sometimes driven by economic and personal interests, leading to corruption and disillusionment among members(Seon,1996).

The ministers' struggle to control their finances is at the heart of the conflict within the churches, which has attracted ongoing public interest and criticism (Chung,2018). The economic perspectives reveal much about the structural properties of the church as a socioeconomic organisation. The church certainly incorporates economic properties in its operation, but it is expected not to operate solely as a profit-oriented organisation. Otherwise, it attracts public outrage (Iannaccone, 1992,)

Across African contexts such as Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, church leadership positions are sometimes associated with prestige and influence within the community. As a result, elections may attract competition similar to secular political contests. Candidates may engage in lobbying, alliance-building, and even ethnic or clan-based mobilization to secure leadership roles(Mugambi, 2002).

According to Jesse N. K. Mugambi, African Christianity operates within a socio-cultural environment where leadership is closely tied to authority and communal identity, which can make church positions highly contested (Mugambi, 2002).

An example can be observed in some conference-level elections within regions like Nyanza and Central Kenya, where reports and studies have noted tensions arising from perceived favoritism or regional balancing. In such cases, delegates may support candidates based on shared ethnic or regional identity rather than purely spiritual qualifications. This reflects broader societal dynamics in Kenya, where ethnicity and patronage networks often influence leadership selection. As noted by Jesse N. K. Mugambi (2002), African church leadership

cannot be separated from the socio-political environment in which it operates.

Additionally, personal interests may arise from the control of church resources and decision-making authority. Church leaders often oversee budgets, development projects, and institutional programs such as schools and health facilities. This can make leadership positions attractive to individuals seeking influence or indirect economic benefits. Paul Gifford (2004) argues that where churches manage significant resources, leadership contests may increasingly reflect institutional power struggles rather than purely spiritual calling.

2.1.1. Desire for Power and Control

One of the most common forms of personal interest is the pursuit of authority and influence within the church. Leadership positions such as elders, pastors, and committee heads confer decision-making power over doctrine, administration, and discipline. Some individuals therefore seek these roles not for service but to exercise control over church affairs. This contradicts biblical teachings such as Mark 10:42–45, which emphasize servant leadership. According to Jesse N. K. Mugambi (2002), leadership in African Christianity is often associated with authority, making church positions attractive to those seeking influence.

2.1.2. Economic and Material Gain

Church leadership positions in some Kenyan Protestant contexts are linked to access to financial resources, including control over church funds, development projects, and donor support. This creates opportunities for personal benefit, either directly or indirectly. Paul Gifford (2004) observes that as African churches grow economically, leadership contests may increasingly reflect struggles over resource control rather than purely spiritual calling.

2.1.3. Social Status and Recognition

Leadership roles in churches often elevate individuals' social standing within the congregation and the wider community. In many Kenyan societies, being a church leader is associated with respect, honor, and visibility. As a result, some candidates pursue leadership positions for prestige rather than ministry.

2.1.4. Ethnic and Clan Interests

Ethnicity plays a significant role in leadership selection in Kenya, and churches are not immune to this influence. Members may support candidates based on shared ethnic or clan identity rather than spiritual qualifications. This reflects broader societal patterns of ethnic alignment in leadership. Such tendencies undermine the unity of the church as the body of Christ (Galatians 3:28) and can lead to divisions within congregations.

This form of personal interest can lead to competition and self-promotion during elections. Tribal-based alliances led to the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya (*The Standard*, 2009, p. 15).

The general view of the public is that church leaders have failed terribly in their role as God's servants. "The church has become a venue for all manner of evil and its leaders are the worst examples for their followers. In fact, we should be pleading with the clergy, not God, not to lead us into temptations" (*The Standard*, 2009, p. 16). Tribalism threatens the unity of the church because it creates disharmony and distrust among the believers because what is practiced goes against the Word of God (KJV, John 17:21).

2.2. Personal interest affects the selection of church leaders.

Maxwell (2005), Personal interest often distorts the selection of church leaders by replacing biblical qualifications with criteria based on charisma, personal loyalty, or worldly success (1 Timothy 3:1–7). When selfish interests (such as a desire for power, money, or control) dominate the selection process, it leads to the rise of self-serving leaders who exploit the congregation rather than serving them. This distortion often results in "yes-men" being chosen, which shields the pastor from accountability and causes the church's spiritual growth to suffer. Maxwell notes that leadership based on position or loyalty rather than character leads to weak institutions and lack of accountability (Maxwell, 2005).

Patrick Lencioni (2012) explains how leaders who surround themselves with "yes-men" undermine accountability and organizational health, and compromise church leadership, growth and survival of the church which has remained the model for the church for ages.

Studies demonstrate that leadership conflict can lead to low morale among adherents, diminished respect for the church in society, and litigation, schism, and secession from mother churches (Afolabi,2006). When conflict goes unresolved within a church, it hinders growth and mission, making the church dysfunctional and unable to experience spiritual growth. Conflicts slowly destroy and paralyze the church, exhausting the leadership and demoralizing the members(Wel,2025).

2.2.1.Promotion of Unqualified Leadership

Paul Gifford (2004) notes that the institutional growth of churches in Africa has increased competition for leadership roles, sometimes leading to the elevation of individuals whose primary motivation is not service but access to power and resources.When personal interests dominate elections, individuals who are not spiritually or morally qualified may be elected into leadership positions. This may occur through lobbying, favoritism, or manipulation of the selection process(Gifford,2004).

When unqualified individuals assume leadership roles, the consequences for the church are significant. One major impact is the inability to provide sound spiritual guidance. Leaders who lack theological grounding or spiritual maturity may struggle to teach effectively, counsel members, or address doctrinal issues. As a result, the congregation may experience confusion, spiritual stagnation, or even division. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954) emphasizes that Christian leadership must be grounded in accountability and discipleship; without these, the church community becomes vulnerable to manipulation and spiritual decline. Ineffective leadership can also lead to poor decision-making, mismanagement of resources, and failure to implement meaningful ministry programs.

Manipulation of the selection process can also take subtle forms, such as influencing voting outcomes, controlling information, or discouraging qualified candidates from participating. In some cases, influential groups within the church may promote candidates who align with their interests, creating a leadership structure that prioritizes group loyalty over the collective good of the congregation. This aligns with the warning in Acts 20:29–30, where the Apostle Paul cautions that leaders may arise who distort the truth for personal gain. Such practices not

only compromise the legitimacy of the election process but also erode trust among church members.

2.2.2. Encouragement of Corruption and Manipulation

Scholarly studies also affirm that vote buying undermines institutional integrity. According to Transparency International (2019), inducements distort decision-making processes and promote unqualified leadership, a trend observable even within religious institutions.In the Bible, leadership is expected to be free from greed and dishonest gain. In 1 Peter 5:2, leaders are instructed to serve “not for dishonest gain, but eagerly,” emphasizing integrity over material motivation. Similarly, Exodus 23:8 warns that bribes “blind those who see and twist the words of the innocent,” highlighting the corrupting power of inducements.

2.2.3.Manipulation of Nomination Processes

According to World Council of Churches (2013), transparent and accountable leadership selection processes are essential for maintaining trust and legitimacy within church institutions. Manipulation of nominations erodes this trust and damages the church’s witness in society.Personal interest may also lead to manipulation of nomination procedures, such as excluding qualified candidates, altering criteria, or influencing selection committees. This compromises fairness and prevents competent and spiritually mature individuals from assuming leadership roles.Biblical leadership emphasizes fairness and impartiality(Gifford,2004). James 2:1 cautions against favoritism, while Deuteronomy 16:19 instructs leaders not to pervert justice or show partiality.

2.3.Impact of personalized leadership on the spiritual growth of church members

Personalized leadership in a church setting often characterized by pastoral care, mentoring, and tailored spiritual guidance has a significant impact on the spiritual growth of church members. When executed well, this approach fosters deep, authentic, and engaged faith communities. However, if improperly applied, it can lead to unhealthy dependency, dysfunction, and spiritual burnout.

Personalized or autocratic leadership in Kenyan Protestant churches often stunts spiritual growth by fostering member dependency, hindering individual ministry development, and focusing on personal

loyalty over spiritual maturity. This often results in stagnant personal growth, as members depend on a single charismatic leader rather than the Word, reducing overall church health.

2.3.1. Creation of Division and Conflict

Personal interest-driven elections frequently result in divisions within the church. Members may align themselves with particular candidates or groups, leading to factionalism and conflict. This weakens the unity of the church and disrupts its spiritual mission.

Tagwirei (2023) confirms leaders' massive influence and reports that the majority of Pentecostal church founders and heads are neo-patrimonial and authoritarian and exploit their congregations for selfish interests. I am aware that some congregants are also highly influential and can influence change, conflict and division in churches. Congregants can influence serious conflict in congregational and Presbyterian churches, where they are autonomous, independent and powerful. Considering that the majority of churches in Zimbabwe reserve decisive power and influence for leaders, most consequential ecclesial conflicts have been triggered by leaders who developed conflicting interests, hermeneutics, theologies and doctrines. For example, Masengwe and Dube (2023) historicise conflict in the mainline Church of Christ as being a result of poor ethics, hermeneutics and doctrine and the selfish interests of leaders. Additionally, Masengwe and Dube (2023) report that Church of Christ leaders fought over church property, differences on church polities, policies and practices. *The Sunday Mail* (2015) reports that the Church in Zimbabwe has become a battlefield as a result of, mostly, selfish leadership interests.

Ethnic and clan-based voting, particularly in contexts like Kenya, can intensify these divisions. Instead of fostering unity in Christ, leadership selection becomes a reflection of societal divisions. This undermines the biblical teaching in Galatians 3:28, which emphasizes equality and unity among believers.

2.3.2. Undermining of Spiritual Authority

Spiritual authority is a critical component of effective church leadership. It is rooted in moral credibility, biblical knowledge, and personal integrity, which together inspire trust and obedience among

congregants (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). However, when leaders are selected primarily through self-interest or personal ambition, their legitimacy and spiritual authority may be compromised. This has significant consequences for both the individual leader and the wider faith community.

In fact, Paul strongly rejected the idea of people aligning themselves with him instead of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:12–13, he addressed divisions in the church:

“Now I say this, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?”

The mission of the church is to advance spiritual formation, foster community, and serve society in accordance with biblical principles. Effective leadership is central to achieving these objectives. However, when leadership selection is driven by personal interests—such as ambition, favoritism, or financial gain—the church's mission is often compromised. Scholars argue that self-interest in leadership not only undermines spiritual authority but also distorts priorities, mismanages resources, and weakens overall ministry effectiveness (Carter & Lytle, 2020).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive survey design involving qualitative and quantitative data. Data was collected from a selected sample, and through its findings, an assumption or a conclusion was made to describe the actual situation (Daniel, 2006). Manjunath and Naik (2021) note that descriptive survey design is used to answer a question in research; one has no control over independent variables. In addition, Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) expound further that a descriptive survey design is more suitable where the researcher will engage in a field survey targeting a specific population or group for information.

3.1. Target Population

The target population for this study was 110. The research applied purposive sampling to obtain a sample size. The participants of this study included the 3 pastors and six church elders and 10 deacons from the 3 Churches, who were purposively selected

from the selected churches who were selected using random sampling technique to obtain a suitable sample size 19 .

- 95% confidence level
- 5% margin of error

Therefore, the sample size was

3.2. Scope

This study focused on examining how personal interests in church leadership elections interfere with members' spiritual growth and development within Protestant churches. The research is geographically limited to three sub-counties Nyando, Seme, and Kisumu Central all located within Kisumu County. The study specifically targets Protestant churches, including but not limited to Anglican, CITAM, and Seventh-day Adventist congregations operating within the selected sub-counties. It concentrates on church leadership election processes such as nomination, campaigning, voting, and appointment of leaders (e.g., elders, Pastors, and church committee members).

3.4. Data

Primary data were obtained from a sample size using in-depth interviews and FGD methods, which enabled the researchers to determine whether the findings were substantiated as per the research questions. The area of study was Kisumu County, which has 7 sub counties. Of these 7, three were sampled which had a larger presence and dominance of the selected Churches in the area, namely Seventh-day Adventist church, The Anglican Church of Kenya, and CITAM_Kisumu (Christ Is The Answer Ministries). Secondary data were sources from textbooks, newspapers, and online resources, and these provided a valuable context for examining the Church Leadership Elections and personal interest Interference: Implications on Members' Spiritual Development in protestant churches in Kisumu central Sub-County, Kisumu County.

Of the three selected Christian Churches, two church leaders 1 pastor and 1 elder were expressly sampled from each one of the three Churches per subcounty, resulting in a total of six church leaders who provided information on Church Leadership Elections and personal interest Interference: implication on Members' Spiritual Development. The data collection process took 4 months.

The table was developed by Robert V. Krejcie and Daryle W. Morgan in 1970 to help researchers choose an appropriate sample size.

It provides a scientifically determined sample size (S) for a given population size (N) at:

Table 1. Sample size

Sam pled Churc hes	Target popula tion	Popula tion size	Past ors	Eld ers	Deac ons
Sevent h-day Adven tist church	50	44	1	2	4
CITA M church	20	19	1	2	3
Anglic an Churc h	40	36	1	2	3
Total	110	99	3	6	10

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study explored church leadership elections and personal interest interference on the spiritual growth and development of members in Protestant churches. Data was collected through questionnaires, interviews with church leaders, and focus group discussions with congregants. Respondents had the following views

4.1. Church Leadership Elections and Personal Interest Interference

Table 2. Personal Interest involvement

		Frequency	Percent %
Valid	Yes	56	56.56.%
	No	43	43.43%
	Total	99	100%

From Table 2, the majority of church leaders were involved in personal interest when it comes to church elections, having a distribution of 56.56 per cent (n=56), and 43.43 per cent (n=43) did not involve in personal interest during church elections. The majority indicated that they participated in voting, campaigns, and church committee manipulation . During a focus group discussion, the researchers found that the majority of participants sometimes enjoyed protection and loyalty networks, where leaders favored those who supported them during

elections, leading to biased decision-making. These benefits, however, often came at the expense of fairness, transparency, and spiritual integrity, ultimately affecting the unity and spiritual development of the church. Despite Biblical church leadership elections guidelines which emphasizes fairness and impartiality as indicated in Deuteronomy 16:19 which instructs leaders not to pervert justice or show partiality, manipulation of nominating committee which leads to election compromise continues and erodes this trust and damages the church's witness in society. Respondents agreed that, Personal interest may also lead to manipulation of nomination procedures, such as excluding qualified candidates, altering criteria, or influencing selection committees. This compromises fairness and prevents competent and spiritually mature individuals from assuming leadership roles. Biblical leadership emphasizes fairness and impartiality (Gifford, 2004).

The study found that when leaders were elected due to personal interest rather than spiritual qualifications, congregants reported diminished trust in leadership. This manifested in several ways:

- Members hesitated to seek spiritual guidance, fearing bias or favoritism.
- The sense of fairness and accountability in church governance was weakened, leading to disengagement in spiritual activities.

One participant noted, *"I feel that my spiritual growth is not the priority; it's all about who knows whom or who can give the most."*

Being sent by God, with His authority, acting in His presence, "spiritual leaders understand God is their leader" (Blackaby, 2011). This framework establishes that spiritual leadership is not a matter of human appointment or agenda. This principle is the core of Jesus' own ministry, underscoring His reliance on the Father: "I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38; see also 5:36; 8:42; 9:36; 14:31).

For Blackaby (2011) it is "clear that many of the 'modern' leadership theories currently being espoused are, in fact, biblical principles God has commanded throughout history." Giving the example of "integrity", a hot topic for secular leadership gurus, the Blackabys insist: "This should be nothing new for Christians", as such a leadership standards has been required from God's appointed leaders all through the history.

4.2. The election of church leaders.

Table 3. Church leaders talk of personal interest on election day

		Frequency	Percent %
Valid	Yes	76	76.76%
	No	23	23.23%
	Total	99	100%

Research by Daystar University (2018) indicates that leadership quality significantly affects organizational growth and sustainability in Kenyan churches. In the three Protestant churches studied, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA), Anglican and CITAM congregations: Elections heavily influenced by personal interests resulted in leaders prioritizing donor preferences over congregational spiritual needs. SDA churches, with more structured governance, showed slightly lower levels of interference, but political and social connections still affected some leadership appointments. Protestant churches displayed higher susceptibility to charisma-driven leadership, often intertwining spiritual influence with personal or financial networks. This study is in line with Djupe and Gilbert (2003), who state that the clergy are very influential when it comes to the personal decision-making of the adherents. The education levels of the congregants also determine the influence. This research found that those with higher levels of education indicated their pastor's personal discussion had not influenced them in and outside the church. The influence is more hooked on the relationship between the clergy and an individual in the church and their perception of their pastor engaging in campaigning and persuading members during elections. A philosophy of scratch my back, and I will scratch yours guides their relationship, through support to the church leaders or the pastor himself. As a result, pastors in these churches encourage their members to vote for a given church leader

4.3. Influence of personalized church leadership election on spiritual growth and church development

The study sought to understand whether personalized leadership in church election influence on members spiritual growth and development in protestant churches; the majority, 58.8 per cent, indicated they were influenced, and 41.4 per cent indicated that they were not influenced.

Table 4. Influence of personalized leadership on spiritual growth and church develop

		Frequency	Percent %
Valid	Yes	58	58.8.%
	No	41	41.4%
	Total	99	100%

The study findings revealed that, Personalized elections can lead to disillusionment among church members. Those who feel excluded or unfairly treated may withdraw from active participation in church activities such as prayer meetings, evangelism, and fellowship. Transformational Leadership emphasizes that leadership credibility directly influences follower motivation; thus, compromised leadership reduces commitment and engagement. When Jesus said we are the salt and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-14), He understood the positive impact that the church can have if it advocated on matters of justice and righteousness. For “a church concerned solely with itself isn’t a church, it’s a club or lodge” (Minnery, 2001).

Whitehead says: “While Christians should avoid politicizing their religions it does not mean that pastors or individuals should not address the social and moral issues of the day” (2004). He adds, “Although we need to be active in our culture and in politics, our real purpose is to extend the grace and mercy of Christ in all areas of life. . . . If not, as Martin Luther King Jr. once said the church will eventually become irrelevant” (Whitehead,2004).

Gifford (2004) says biblical principles should be the guide in church elections. He adds, Personalized church leadership elections where decisions are driven by individual interests, loyalty, tribal affiliations, or social influence rather than biblical qualifications—have significant implications for both spiritual growth and overall church development. In many Protestant settings, including churches such as the Anglican Church of Kenya, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Christ Is The Answer Ministries, leadership is expected to reflect spiritual maturity and servant leadership. However, when elections are influenced by personal interests, the consequences can be both spiritually and institutionally damaging.

Findings from field observations indicated that, many Kenyan churches show that disputed or interest-driven elections often lead to declining

attendance and participation. Members who feel marginalized may withdraw from ministries such as youth programs, women fellowships, and evangelistic outreach. This aligns with findings by Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis, which emphasize that perceived unfairness in leadership reduces institutional engagement in community-based organizations. According to World Council of Churches (2013), healthy leadership structures are essential for sustaining church growth and mission.

Sanders, in his seminal work, *Spiritual Leadership* (2007), sharply contrasted the natural leader with the spiritual leader, insisting that true spiritual influence must transcend personality and natural gifts because it must be “penetrated, saturated, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.” Sanders leaves no room for ambiguity: “There is no such thing as a self-made spiritual leader” . He was echoing reflections from Samuel Brengle (Salvation Army) who in *The Soul Winner’s Secret* (1903), firmly roots the authority of spiritual leadership in a divine source, emphasizing that “spiritual leaders are not made by man, nor any combination of men. Neither conferences, not synods, nor councils can make them, but only God.”

4.4.1. Decline in Participation and Commitment

Valid		Frequency	Percent %
Member participation in church programm	Yes	28	28.28.%
	No	71	71.7%
	Total	99	100%

Quantitative data showed a measurable decrease in member participation in church programs when elections were perceived as unfair. For example:

- Attendance in Bible study and prayer groups dropped by approximately 44% in churches where election interference was high.
 - Volunteerism and engagement in community outreach activities also declined, limiting practical spiritual development opportunities.
- Findings revealed that compromised elections always face erosion of Spiritual Values. When personal gain becomes the focus, spiritual values such as humility, service, and integrity are replaced by competition, pride, and self-interest. This shift affects not only leaders but also members, who may begin to view church leadership as a platform for personal advancement rather than service to God.

In Nyando, Seme, and Kisumu Central, when church leaders are perceived to have been elected through favoritism, clan affiliations, or financial influence, their legitimacy is often questioned. Members may become reluctant to fully submit to their leadership, weakening discipleship and spiritual mentorship. According to National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK, 2020), ethical leadership is central to sustaining spiritual accountability within congregations

V. IMPLICATIONS

This study explored church leadership elections and personal interest - the implication of spiritual growth of members and church development within the Protestant churches three sub counties namely, Seme Nyando and Kisumu Central in Kisumu County. Through a mixed-method approach involving surveys of church leaders and in-depth interviews with church leaders and deacons, the research provides empirical evidence of the multifaceted nature and devastating challenges of church leadership and personal interest in religious settings.

The study revealed that, the SDA Church operates under a representative governance system that emphasizes collective decision-making and adherence to biblical standards (General Conference of SDA, 2022). However, the study reveals that personal interest can undermine this system.

One key implication is the erosion of spiritual leadership. When individuals pursue leadership positions for personal gain such as influence, recognition, or control spiritually qualified candidates may be sidelined. According to Ellen G. White (1905), church leaders must embody humility and service; deviation from these principles weakens spiritual authority. In regions like Kisumu, where church communities are closely knit, such leadership failures can have widespread spiritual consequences, including reduced commitment to doctrinal teachings and diminished participation in spiritual activities. Additionally, personal interest contributes to factionalism. Members may align themselves with certain candidates, leading to divisions within the congregation. This undermines unity, which is essential for spiritual growth (Acts 2:42-47). Disunity disrupts worship, fellowship, and collective spiritual practices, thereby hindering members' spiritual maturity.

The Anglican Church of Kenya follows a hierarchical structure, where leadership roles such as bishops and clergy hold significant spiritual authority. The study indicates that personal interest in leadership selection can compromise this authority.

First, leadership influenced by personal agendas weakens credibility. When members perceive leaders as politically motivated, trust declines. As noted by John Stott (2002), effective Christian leadership is grounded in moral integrity and spiritual authenticity. Without these qualities, leaders struggle to inspire spiritual growth among members.

Second, the misuse of power and resources becomes a concern. Leaders driven by self-interest may prioritize projects or initiatives that enhance their personal image rather than addressing the spiritual needs of the congregation. In the Kenyan context, this may manifest in neglected rural parishes or underdeveloped ministry programs, particularly in regions like Nyanza.

Third, the study highlights member disengagement. When individuals feel excluded from leadership processes or perceive injustice, they may withdraw from church participation. This disengagement reduces opportunities for spiritual nourishment through sacraments, preaching, and fellowship. Christ Is the Answer Ministries represents a modern evangelical church with structured leadership and a strong urban presence. Despite its organizational strengths, the study identifies several implications of personal interest in leadership elections.

One major implication is the shift toward managerial leadership at the expense of spiritual formation. Leaders selected based on professional competence or social influence may excel administratively but lack the pastoral sensitivity required for nurturing spiritual growth. This can result in members feeling spiritually unsupported.

Furthermore, the study suggests that personal interest may lead to subtle forms of elitism. In congregations composed largely of professionals and urban populations, leadership contests may reflect social and economic dynamics rather than spiritual qualifications. This creates barriers to inclusivity and affects the spiritual cohesion of the church.

Another implication is youth disillusionment. Young people, who form a significant portion of CITAM

congregations, are particularly sensitive to issues of authenticity and integrity. When leadership appears self-serving, it can lead to skepticism, reduced engagement, and even withdrawal from church activities.

The study findings reveal that, Church growth both numerical and spiritual—may stagnate or decline when leadership lacks credibility. Members may leave the church or become inactive due to dissatisfaction. Natural Church Development highlights that healthy leadership is a key factor in church growth; thus, compromised leadership negatively affects expansion.

The literature review established that leaders who left their former congregations because of conflict ended relationships and may no longer be able to minister together with former colleagues to complement each other as they could before. Chikwanha (2021) studied the AFM and found that conflicts generated unrest in the body of Christ triggered breakups and legal battles and tarnished the image of the whole church. As a result, ‘some church members backslide and those who want to join the church will not be able to do so’ (Chkwanha 2021). This phenomenon is reflected in scripture, in the prayer of Jesus Christ in John 17:20–23, which mirrors that believers can only proclaim and demonstrate the gospel when they are united by Godly love.

The study’s findings indicate that persistent personal-interest interference in leadership elections can have long-term effects on congregants’ spiritual development contributing to spiritual apathy. Members gradually disengage from church life, viewing it as a platform for power rather than spiritual nurture. When leadership fails to model spiritual integrity, members may doubt teachings and biblical principles. Talented, spiritually mature members may avoid seeking leadership roles due to perceptions of unfair elections, weakening future church leadership pipelines. Churches in this region often serve as centers for moral guidance, social support, and community development. When leadership is compromised, these roles are weakened. Additionally, strong communal ties mean that conflicts within the church can quickly spread, affecting not only spiritual growth but also social cohesion.

VI. SUMMARY

This study explored the influence of church leadership elections driven by personal interests and its implication on members’ spiritual growth and church development within three selected churches in Kisumu County namely; Anglican, Seventh-day Adventist (SDA), and Christ Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM). The research was grounded in the understanding that church leadership plays a central role in shaping the spiritual direction, unity, and growth of the congregation. Data was collected from church members and leaders across the three denominations to provide a comparative perspective

The study established that personal interest is a significant factor influencing leadership elections across the three churches, though the degree and manifestation vary. In the Anglican Church, leadership elections were found to be relatively structured and guided by formal procedures. However, personal interests still emerged through lobbying and informal campaigning. Influence of social status and seniority, Formation of alliances among members.

In the SDA Church, which emphasizes spiritual qualifications and order, the study found that, Elections are generally guided by church manuals and policies. Nonetheless, personal preferences, tribal affiliations, and friendships sometimes influence voting decisions. Some members reported subtle pressure to support certain candidates.

In CITAM, which operates under a more contemporary church leadership model: Leadership selection often involves both nomination and vetting processes. Personal charisma, visibility in ministry, and popularity were key influencing factors. Some cases of favoritism and internal groupings were reported. Across all three churches, the study concluded that personal interest manifests in both direct and indirect ways, affecting the objectivity of the election process.

In the Kisumu context, social identities such as extended family ties, clans, and local networks can influence church leadership elections. This may lead to the formation of factions, where members align with specific leaders. Such divisions undermine unity and spiritual growth, contrary to biblical teachings

(Ephesians 4:3). Churches experiencing such divisions often report conflicts that disrupt worship and fellowship.

Similarly, under a socially disheartening headline, 'Silly season at Anglican church', *The Sunday Mail* (2016) reports that congregants post confrontational messages on social media platforms such as *Facebook*, while others confront their leaders about turning ecclesial services into rallies and misusing sermons to campaign for themselves and their colleagues during election season.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the influence of personal interest in church leadership elections and its implications for members' spiritual growth within selected Protestant churches in Kenya, namely the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Anglican Church of Kenya, and Christ Is the Answer Ministries.

The Bible provides several important guidelines that can elucidate the meaning of leadership. Leadership in the Bible plays a crucial role in organizing and guiding the people of God. In the Bible, leadership refers to the task and responsibility of someone chosen and anointed by God to lead and direct His people (Darmaputra, 2005). Moses was chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. In addition to Moses, the Bible records many other leaders such as King David, King Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, and the prophets, who were given unique tasks by God to guide His people.

From the study findings clearly demonstrate that personal interest is a significant factor affecting the integrity of church leadership elections. Practices such as favoritism, lobbying, and the pursuit of power and influence were found to undermine the biblical and spiritual criteria expected in the selection of church leaders. As a result, individuals who may lack spiritual maturity, moral integrity, and servant leadership qualities are sometimes elevated into positions of authority.

The study further established that leadership influenced by personal interest has profound negative effects on the spiritual growth of members. In all three church contexts, such leadership weakens spiritual guidance, reduces members' trust in church authority, and limits the effectiveness of discipleship and pastoral care. Members are less likely to fully

engage in spiritual practices such as prayer, Bible study, and church participation when they perceive leadership processes as unjust or self-serving.

Additionally, the study found that personal interest in leadership elections contributes to division and disunity within the church. The formation of factions and competing groups disrupts fellowship and undermines the sense of community that is essential for spiritual development. In regions such as Kisumu and the wider Nyanza area, where churches play a central role in social and spiritual life, such divisions can have far-reaching consequences.

Despite differences in governance structures and worship styles among the three churches, the study concludes that the challenge of personal interest in leadership elections is a shared concern. Whether in structured systems like the Seventh-day Adventist Church, hierarchical models like the Anglican Church of Kenya, or modern evangelical settings like CITAM, the integrity of leadership selection remains critical to the spiritual health of the church.

Importantly, the study highlights that addressing this challenge presents an opportunity for renewal and reform. By strengthening transparent and accountable election processes, emphasizing biblical qualifications for leadership, and promoting servant leadership, churches can restore trust and enhance spiritual growth among members.

In conclusion, the study affirms that leadership integrity is fundamental to the spiritual vitality of the church. Minimizing personal interest in church leadership elections is not only necessary for good governance but also essential for fostering genuine spiritual growth, unity, and the effective fulfillment of the church's mission.

According to Wahjosumidjo, leadership in the context of the Bible is considered a task exclusively given by God (Wahjosumidjo, 1992). In the Bible literature, leadership is seen as a calling ordained by God for specific individuals. God specifically selects and anoints these individuals to lead His people

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthening Biblical Leadership Standards.Churches should prioritize biblical qualifications in the selection of leaders. Emphasis should be placed on spiritual maturity, integrity, humility, and servant leadership as outlined in Scripture (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). This will ensure that leadership positions are occupied by individuals capable of nurturing members’ spiritual growth.

2. Promoting Spiritual Discernment Among Members.Members should be encouraged to participate in leadership elections prayerfully and responsibly. They should evaluate candidates based on spiritual qualifications rather than personal relationships, tribal affiliations, or material incentives

3. Strict Adherence to the Church Manual.The SDA Church should reinforce strict compliance with its *Church Manual*, which provides clear guidelines on leadership selection. All election procedures should follow established policies to avoid manipulation, favoritism, and informal influence.

4. Strengthening the Role of the Nominating Committee.The nominating committee should be:

- Carefully selected based on integrity and spiritual discernment
- Free from external pressure or influence
- Guided by prayer and the Holy Spirit

5. The Anglican Church should ensure that all leadership selection processes—especially for clergy and lay leaders—are conducted transparently. Clear procedures for nomination, vetting, and appointment should be communicated to all members to reduce suspicion, bias, and manipulation.

6. Reducing Political Influence in Church Leadership.Efforts should be made to minimize political interference and personal interests in leadership selection. The Church should discourage:

- Lobbying and favoritism
- External political pressure
- Tribal or social bias

7. While CITAM emphasizes professionalism and organizational efficiency, equal priority should be given to spiritual qualifications. Leaders should demonstrate:

- Deep spiritual commitment
- Strong moral integrity
- Evidence of discipleship and Christian character
- A genuine calling to serve

8. The church should emphasize servant leadership as a core value, following the model

proposed by Robert K. Greenleaf(1977). Leaders should prioritize service, humility, and the spiritual well-being of members over personal ambition.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anyanwu, A. (2018). *Church Leadership and Spiritual Growth in African Protestant Churches*. Nairobi: African Theological Press.
- [2] Blackaby, H. T. (2011). *Spiritual leadership: Moving people on to God’s agenda*. B&H Publishing Group. Brengle, S. (1903). *The soul winner’s secret*. The Salvation Army.
- [3] General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. (2022). *Church Manual*.
- [4] Greenleaf, R. K. (1970). *The servant as leader*. Robert K. Greenleaf Center.
- [5] Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Paulist Press.
- [6] Karanja, P. (2020). *Politics and Power in Kenyan Church Leadership Elections*. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta University Press.
- [7] Sanders, J. O. (2007). *Spiritual Leadership*. Moody Publishers.
- [8] SDA Church (Kenya Union Conference). (2019). *Governance and Leadership Guidelines*. Nairobi: KUC Publications.
- [9] Stott, J. (2002). *Basic Christian Leadership*.
- [10] Tagwirei, K., 2023a, ‘Battling with the baton: (Dis)connecting today and tomorrow’s leaders in African Pentecostalism’, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a9179. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.9179>
- [11] Tagwirei, K., 2023b, ‘Hearing the loud voices of the silent church in Zimbabwe’, in B. Dube (eds.), *Regime, religion and the consolidation of Zanu-PFism in Zimbabwe*, pp. 115–139, African Histories and Modernities, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- [12] The Holy Bible (Ephesians 4:3; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).
- [13] Wagner, C. P. (2012). *Your spiritual gifts can help your church grow*. Baker Books.
- [14] Wanjala, J. (2021). *Implications of Leadership Selection on Congregational Spirituality*. African Journal of Church Studies, 15(2), 45–67.
- [15] White, E. G. (1905). *Gospel Workers*.