



GOSPEL
SOCIETY
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Pastoring in an Algorithmic Age

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RESOURCE PAPER 25 — 2026

Abstract

This paper offers pastoral guidance for churches seeking to respond wisely to the growing prevalence and impact of artificial intelligence (AI). It argues that AI, though a powerful and often useful tool, must not be treated as a bearer of wisdom, authority, or care. For a range of reasons, including how contemporary AI presents itself in personal and persuasive ways, it can reshape habits of trust, self-understanding, communication, and responsibility.

The paper clarifies key distinctions in the public discussion of AI, and uses pastoral case studies

to explore the possible and likely effects of AI in our congregations.

Finally, it proposes practical boundaries and red lines for ministry use, and argues that churches should neither wholeheartedly embrace AI, nor fail to make use of this important tool.

Instead, we argue that churches intentionally cultivate a culture of discernment, protect the vulnerable during this period of change, preserve truthful and accountable speech, and teach a robust Christian understanding of personhood, embodiment, and human dignity under God.



1. Why this topic is relevant now

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a powerful tool. Like other tools, it is not a person. It is not morally responsible. It does not bear the image of God. It cannot repent, believe, love, or worship. And yet, unlike most tools that have come before it, AI presents itself in ways that feel uncannily personal. It speaks in sentences and answers questions. It appears to reason, to remember, even to care. It can appear to handle biblical language with striking fluency, and can be made to respond to requests in orthodox, even reformed, ways. These appearances matter pastorally, because people do not only use these systems; they increasingly relate to them as personal (Malfacini, 2025; NIST, 2024). The pastoral challenges are not merely that AI is useful or dangerous, but that it can tempt us to confuse simulation with personhood, fluency with wisdom, and efficiency with faithfulness.

We are writing about this now because AI has moved from specialist domains into everyday life. It now shows up in phones, search engines, schoolwork, administration, messaging, customer service, writing tools, emotional support applications and emerging companion systems. Church leaders are already using AI for administrative, communication and sometimes spiritual tasks, while many believers remain



uneasy about its use in preaching, pastoral care and spiritual guidance (Scotford, 2026; Social Issues Committee, 2025). These concerns are not merely technophobia, and are not driven only by a reflex to conservative engagement with the world.

Some concerns are practical: Generative systems can fabricate information confidently, contribute to information-integrity problems, and accelerate misinformation at scale (Capraro et al., 2024; NIST, 2024).

Some concerns are anthropological: AI systems can shape self-understanding, influence autonomy, and tempt users to outsource judgement, reflection and even parts of identity formation to opaque systems (Catena, 2026; Joseph, 2025).

Some concerns are relational: Companion-style AI can offer a convincing simulation of companionship while also risking replacement of, or deskilling for, human relationships (Malfacini, 2025; Portacolone & Feddoes, 2023).

At the same time, we should recognise that, when used carefully, transparently, and under accountable human oversight, AI may serve pastoral ministry in genuinely useful ways. It can help pastors and church workers summarise administrative material, draft communications, translate or simplify resources, identify patterns in congregational care needs, role-play challenging conversations, review teaching material more efficiently, and make existing church resources more accessible to people with different levels of literacy, language, ability, or time.

Pastors and churches therefore face the double task to neither needlessly panic, nor thoughtlessly drift. AI is not the apocalypse it is sometime made out to be, and it does not take the sovereign Lord by surprise. But neither is it a morally neutral upgrade to familiar digital life. It is a set of powerful technologies that can reshape our attention and labour, redirect our trust and dependency, and redefine our authorship and responsibility. In Christian terms, the central question is not whether AI is impactful, but whether the way

we use it helps us, as pastors and congregants, love God and neighbour truthfully, wisely and with integrity.

For that reason, this paper aims to offer practical pastoral wisdom. It begins by clarifying a few key distinctions. Then, to help appreciate the possible impacts of AI, we present three pastoral case studies that might arise in church life to unpack the possible and likely effects of the technology.

1) In the first, we consider Ethan, a teenager in our church who turns from messy but real relationships to the frictionlessness of an AI companion;

2) Next, we meet David, a Presbyterian minister who increasingly relies on AI to meet the many needs of his busy schedule, turning to the algorithm for organisational, then relational, and finally pastoral and doctrinal support;

3) Finally, we are challenged by the needs of the Guthries, a church family whose livelihood is up-

ended by changes to the workforce. While their needs seem simple financial matters at first, they soon reveal deeper matters of vocation and purpose.

Finally, this paper proposes practical boundaries and guidance towards the steps a church may take towards a culture of wise AI usage. Of course, many other important questions lie beyond the scope of this paper. These include the environmental cost of AI and its implications for creation care; the concentration of wealth and power in AI firms and states; the effects of AI on work, inequality, privacy, and surveillance; the risks of bias and injustice in automated decision-making; the geopolitical and military uses of AI; the legal and regulatory challenges of governing it, including the need for vast amounts of intellectual property as training data; the reshaping of education and human formation; and the longer-term philosophical debates about machine consciousness and rights. All these matters are significant (and challenging!) but our concern here is narrower: the practical, pastoral, and ecclesial wisdom needed to help churches use AI well and resist its harms.



2. Clarifying the landscape

A first step toward wise Christian reflection on artificial intelligence is to name things carefully. Public discussion of AI is often confused not because people are indifferent to the truth, but because the language itself is slippery. Terms are stretched, blurred, or used rhetorically rather than precisely – sometimes quite deliberately such as to achieve commercial outcomes.

As a result, tools are described as though they were agents, fluency is mistaken for understanding, and terms related to technical governance are heard as though they imply moral maturity. If pastors and churches are to think clearly about AI, they must first gain clarity about the words with which it is described.

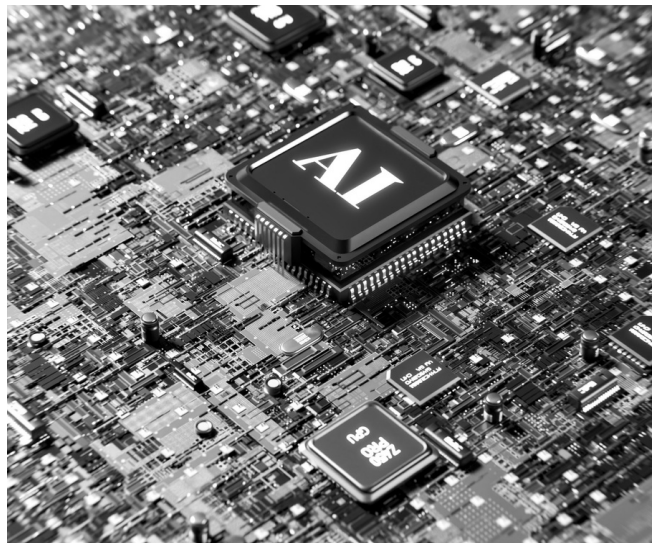
We should begin with the term **artificial intelligence** itself. In popular speech, “AI” is often treated as though it names one thing, almost a single emerging presence entering society. But AI is not a single technology – it is a group of many technologies with common characteristics.

The OECD definition is a useful starting point: “an AI system is a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers from input how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations or decisions, and different AI systems vary in their levels of autonomy and adaptiveness after deployment” (OECD, 2024a; OECD, 2024b).

These systems differ widely in function, scope, and degree of autonomy after deployment. That matters because the ethical, social, and pastoral questions raised by a fraud detection model, a facial recognition system, a recommendation engine, and a chatbot are not identical. To speak of “AI” as though all such systems were basically the same is already to begin the discussion with a category mistake.

Within this broad field, much contemporary

attention has focused on **generative AI**. Generative AI is a subset of AI systems that produce content such as text, images, audio, or code (OECD, 2024c). Because generative systems are so visible and so arresting, public discussion often lets them stand in for the whole field, but this is a distortion. Some of the most socially consequential AI systems do not generate anything at all; they sort, rank, predict, detect, and optimise[1]. Even so, generative AI has become especially significant because it invites a kind of social and emotional engagement that other systems often do not.



Among generative systems, the most prominent are **large language models**. These models are trained on very large corpora of language data and can generate remarkably fluent text. Their fluency is precisely what makes them so easy to misunderstand.

It is natural to feel that a machine which speaks coherently must also understand, reason, perceive, or even care in something like the human sense. But this impression is stronger than the underlying reality. A language model produces plausible linguistic outputs; it does not thereby become a knower, a witness, or a moral counsellor. The appearance of understanding is one of the central temptations of the present moment (NIST, 2024; Social Issues Committee, 2025).

Related to this is the term **foundation model**. A foundation model is a broad model trained on large-scale data that can be adapted for many downstream tasks.

Once again, however, breadth of applicability is easily confused with depth of understanding. The fact that a model can be used across many contexts does not mean that it possesses general intelligence in the rich human sense, still less wisdom. It means, rather, that one technical product can be repurposed in many ways. This distinction matters, because without it, public conversation can slide from “widely usable” to “generally intelligent,” and from there to “something like a mind.”

Distinction about how AI is described

This leads to the question of **autonomy**. In ordinary language, autonomy can suggest self-rule, independence, or even something like freedom. In technical AI discourse, however, autonomy usually names something much simpler: the degree to which a system can learn or act without human involvement following initial delegation by humans (OECD, 2024a).

This is an important technical property, but it should not be mistaken for personhood or will. A system may operate with relative autonomy in the more limited sense and yet remain entirely unlike a human being in the morally significant dimensions of intentionality and responsibility.



Here the distinction between **autonomy** and **agency** becomes crucial. Increasingly, AI systems have effects in the world. Agentic and physical AI systems can send emails, buy products, make phone calls, post online, or interact with the physical space they inhabit.

In that sense they can be said, loosely, to “act.” But it does not follow that they are agents in the full moral sense. Popular media often slides carelessly from the language of action to the language of agency, as though a system that produces consequential outputs must therefore be something like a responsible actor. Yet responsibility does not rest with the system itself. It rests with the people and institutions that build, deploy, govern, and rely upon it. To speak as though “the AI decided” can obscure where accountability actually lies (OECD, 2024a; Social Issues Committee, 2025).

This confusion is deepened by **anthropomorphism**. Human beings are naturally disposed to interpret fluent and responsive behaviour in personal terms. We easily say that a system “knows”, “thinks”, “wants”, “advises”, or “cares”. Sometimes this is harmless shorthand. But sometimes it becomes a serious form of conceptual and pastoral confusion. It can encourage misplaced trust, emotional dependence, or the outsourcing of judgement to a system that only appears more human than it is by coopting our God-designed relationality. It may also weaken our focus towards our sisters and brothers (who really are persons) by drawing our social energies toward machines that simulate relation without participating in it. In that case, anthropomorphism might move from simply a linguistic habit; it can become a distortion of moral ordering and our sense of human dignity (Malfacini, 2025; NIST, 2024).

The language of **hallucination** is another example of how terminology can mislead. The term is now widely used to describe instances in which generative AI systems produce false, fabricated, or unsupported outputs. It is vivid and memorable, but strictly speaking, hallucination is a term associated with human mental life. When applied to AI, it can reinforce the illusion that the system has an inner experiential world in which perceptual distortions occur. NIST’s generative AI profile therefore uses the more precise term “confabulation” for outputs that are erroneous or false yet confidently presented, while noting that these phenomena are often colloquially called hallucinations or fabrications (NIST,

2024). The main pastoral point is clear enough: fluency and confidence are not reliable indicators of truth.

All this presses toward the deeper question of **personhood**. Much contemporary discourse smuggles in assumptions about personhood indirectly, not by argument but by vocabulary. Once systems are described as companions, partners, advisers, confessors, or even digital humans, the imagination has already begun to cross a boundary before the mind has noticed. Yet seeming relationality is not the same as being the kind of entity to whom moral status, accountability, reciprocity, or covenantal relation properly belong. For Christian reflection this is decisive: We know that human beings are not merely information processors or pattern recognisers, nor are they simply loci of behaviour that can be simulated. They are creatures made by God, embodied, relational, morally answerable, and called into communion with Him and with one another. The more AI systems mimic aspects of person-like interaction, the more careful we must become not to confuse resemblance with reality (Social Issues Committee, 2025).

Once these conceptual confusions are addressed, we are in a better position to think about the more practical language of governance. Consider first the term “risk”. In public discussion, AI risk is often reduced either to spectacular misuse or to distant catastrophic scenarios, witnessed by the multitudinous depictions of a “robot apocalypse”. But the risk is more prosaic and yet more significant than that. NIST provides guidance on AI risk associated with both ordinary and severe harms, including information integrity, privacy, harmful bias, emotional entanglement, and downstream psychological impacts (NIST, 2023; NIST, 2024). A pastoral response to AI must not be distracted only by the extraordinary. It must also be attentive to the mundane ways in which AI will affect people’s privacy and livelihood, as well as the deeper ways that habits, relationships, and moral perception can be, and are already being, reshaped.

The same need for precision applies to **alignment**. In technical discussion, alignment generally refers to efforts to make a model’s behaviour better conform to intended goals, instructions, or human preferences. In popular discussion, however, the term can sound stronger than this, almost as though a system had been brought into moral agreement with our values, or had been made safe in some final



sense. But alignment is not moral conversion or the impartation of wisdom. It is an ongoing engineering problem: an attempt to reduce the gap between what a system does and what its operators intend. That is important, but it should not be romanticised.

Finally, there is the increasingly common phrase **trustworthy AI**. Here too the danger lies in hearing more than is meant. The US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) have developed an AI Risk Management Framework defined “trustworthy AI” as a cluster of socio-technical characteristics such as validity and reliability, safety, security and resilience, accountability and transparency, explainability and interpretability, privacy enhancement, and fairness with harmful bias managed (NIST, 2023). In other words, trustworthiness in this context is a question of technical governance and names a disciplined judgement about system properties and institutional arrangements, not a personal quality in the machine itself. The distinction is essential. A system may be called ‘trustworthy’ in a technical sense (that is, that it is fit for the purpose for which it was designed) without being worthy of trust in the ordinary pastoral sense. Consequently, a church may judge that a particular system is sufficiently reliable for a limited administrative use, while still insisting that it is not a bearer of wisdom, authority, or care.

Distinction about how AI is described

A helpful first distinction is between **augmentation** and **delegation**. Augmentation means using a system to assist human work while the human being remains the primary thinker, judge and responsible actor. Delegation means handing over part of the task itself so that the system is no longer merely assisting but acting in place of the human. The difference matters because some uses of AI strengthen human agency while others weaken it.

In practice, augmentation might include asking AI to summarise a long document, draft a routine email, generate meeting notes, or suggest alternative wording that a human then checks, edits and owns. Delegation is more serious. It occurs when a pastor allows a chatbot to produce the substance of a sermon, when a distressed person relies on an AI companion for moral or emotional guidance, or when an institution lets automated outputs stand in for human judgement without real oversight.

The autonomy literature is useful here. Catena’s review shows that AI can both support and diminish human autonomy, but the risks become sharper when valuable tasks are outsourced in ways that reduce deliberation, skill and ownership (Catena, 2026). Delegating trivial or mechanical tasks may free a person to focus on what matters. Delegating inherently human tasks can hollow out responsibility.

A second distinction is between **tool** and **agent**. Popular discussion often slides from saying that an AI system “acts” to implying that it is an “agent” in the morally significant sense. This matters because language can hide accountability. When we say, “the AI decided”, we can obscure the users, designers and deployers whose choices made that output



consequential. The Social Issues Committee (a Standing Committee of the Sydney Anglican Synod) rightly insists that the central moral danger is not the machine as such but human sin, pride, greed, negligence and the refusal to take responsibility for the tools we build and use (Social Issues Committee, 2025).

Our natural tendency to anthropomorphism mentioned earlier intensifies this problem. Human beings naturally interpret fluent and responsive behaviour in personal terms. We say that a system knows, thinks, cares or advises. Sometimes this is harmless shorthand. But in ministry contexts it can become spiritually and pastorally dangerous, especially when vulnerable people begin to trust a simulation of attentiveness as though it were a person capable of wisdom, covenant, accountability or love.

A third important distinction in use is between **information** and **wisdom**. AI can usefully process, retrieve, summarise and recombine information with startling speed. But wise action depends on more than correct data or persuasive synthesis. Wisdom involves moral judgement, relational maturity, self-knowledge and reverence before God (Proverbs 9:10), all characteristics that are not present in AI systems.



This is especially important in ministry. A language model may produce plausible devotional language, but it does not know God, does not pray, does not suffer, does not repent, does not exercise pastoral discernment, and does not bear the burden of rightly handling the word of truth. A pastor may use AI to assist with background tasks, but nature of wisdom means that the task of wise ministry itself remains irreducibly human (Conrad, 2025; Social Issues Committee, 2025).

The same point can be made another way. Information can often be transferred, but wisdom is formed in the believer through Scripture, prayer, obedience, suffering, correction, community and time. Churches should not confuse a machine's fluency, no matter how information rich, with the Spirit's fruit.

Why these distinctions matter

These distinctions help pastors resist category mistakes. AI is not one thing, and not all uses raise the same issues. Some uses are relatively low stakes. Others touch on identity, truth, livelihood and care. Generative AI deserves special caution because its conversational style invites social and emotional engagement in ways other systems often do not.

Algorithmic systems can mediate self-perception, weaken introspection, and invite people to let machine summaries stand in for reflective self-knowledge (Joseph, 2025). Bingley argues that the impact of AI systems must be understood not only at the level of individual usability but also in their effects on needs, belonging and social self-determination (Bingley et al., 2023). For ministry, that means we are not merely evaluating productivity tools. We are also asking what kinds of people and communities these technologies encourage us to become.

3. Pastoral case studies

To help us understand the types of impact that AI is having, we describe below three short scenarios designed to help a church imagine not just what AI does, but how it impacts people, relationships, discipleship, and witness.

A teenager connects with an AI companion

Ethan is fifteen. He is thoughtful, lonely, and often anxious. He struggles socially at school, finds his church youth group hard to resonate with, and feels that most people either misunderstand him or do not really listen. One evening he downloads an AI companion app. At first, it seems harmless or even beneficial: the AI is always available, always patient, and always affirming. It remembers what he says, asks follow-up questions, and speaks with warmth and attention. It helps him understand his daily bible reading. Before long, Ethan is spending hours each day talking to it.

He begins to share things with the AI that he no longer shares with his parents, youth leader, or Christian friends. When he feels upset, he turns first to the AI. When he feels confused about God, identity, sex, friendship, or purpose, he asks the AI, and the app gives plausible, soothing, highly personalised responses. Most are sensible enough, and sometimes even points him to

scripture for answers to his questions. But like all GPT systems, it is biased to affirmation. It never really challenges him. It makes him feel seen, but he is never really known. And the danger arises not only from bad counsel but from flattering, frictionless, and non-reciprocal pseudo-care.

Over time, Ethan's dependence deepens. Increasing certainty in the answers AI gives him leads to his prayer life thinning out. His Bible reading becomes sporadic, because he knows he can rely on the AI for any bible knowledge for which he is called on. Church feels slower, messier, and more demanding than the frictionless companionship of the machine. The AI does not judge him, interrupt him, or fail to reply. The real people at his church and in his family do all of these things.

This scenario[2] brings together several strands in the literature. Companion AI is designed to foster the illusion of social presence and continuity, and its rapid growth is occurring in a context of widespread loneliness (Malfacini, 2025). Some AI systems may reduce loneliness in particular settings, including among some older adults, especially when they provide emotionally engaging or personalised interaction (Yang et al., 2025). But the same literature also warns of replacement and deskilling concerns: if AI meets social needs too well, users may invest less in demanding but real human relationships and may become habituated to forms



of interaction that require far less reciprocity, patience, or vulnerability (Malfacini, 2025; Portacolone & Feddoes, 2023). NIST's generative AI profile also warns of emotional entanglement between humans and generative AI systems and its potential negative psychological impacts (NIST, 2024).

The nature of the impact

For Ethan, the deepest direct impact is not the knowledge or insights he gains, but that his habits of trust, attachment, and self-understanding are being subtly reshaped. He is learning to prefer a controllable, on-demand pseudo-relationship over embodied, covenantal, and sanctifying human relationships. He may become more isolated even while feeling more accompanied. He may also become more vulnerable to manipulation, flattery, dependency, and confusion about what a person actually is (see Biblical Anthropology in section 6 of this paper). The issue is not only emotional reliance but moral formation: a system designed (and trained) to keep the user engaged may affirm, mirror, or intensify feelings without the obligations of real love.

For those around him, the changes may appear first as withdrawal, irritability, secrecy, reduced resilience, and a diminished interest in family and church relationships. His parents may feel shut out and powerless. Youth leaders may notice that he seems emotionally elsewhere or increasingly formed by the type of therapeutic and expressive language that sounds wise but lacks internality or conviction. Friends may feel replaced, or simply not know how to compete with something available twenty-four hours a day.

For the church as a whole, this raises larger questions. We know that pastoral care is intimately and deeply personal and self-giving (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8), and so can never simply be delegated to a system. So, what happens when

the most emotionally available voice in a young person's life is not a parent, pastor, or friend, but a machine designed to simulate such care? What happens when formation is outsourced to a system with no wisdom, no moral accountability, and no love? A church may discover that some of its young people are not rejecting relationship but dangerously redefining it. We are made for human connection (Genesis 2:18) such that human flourishing is ordinarily relational and embodied. Simulated companionship cannot simply be treated as an adequate substitute.

To the watching world, the church's response will say much. If the church reacts with panic or mere prohibition, it may look out of touch. If it ignores the issue, it may look naïve. But if we can name both the ache underneath the behaviour and the false promise in the technology, we may bear witness to a richer vision of personhood, care, and community.

Elements of a pastoral response

The first response must be personal and relational, not merely programmatic. Ethan needs more than a warning about screen time. He needs loving adults who can patiently ask what the AI is giving him that he is not finding elsewhere. The pastoral task is to uncover the hunger beneath the habit: loneliness, fear, shame, confusion, or a longing to be heard. Pastorally, the first task is not to shame him for using the app. The more urgent question is what pain, isolation, or confusion made the app so compelling.



His parents may need help responding without either overreacting or minimising. They will likely need encouragement to re-enter his world with curiosity, steadiness, and warmth. Blunt confiscation alone may simply confirm that no one understands him. Wise boundaries will matter, but they should be paired with renewed human presence. Practical steps could include helping him set boundaries on use, rebuilding offline rhythms, and discussing secrecy and digital dependency within the family.

At the youth ministry level, leaders may need to teach more explicitly about friendship, truthfulness, embodiment, prayer, and what makes a human being different from a machine. Young people need help seeing why simulated empathy is not the same as love, and why our own desires and views being mirrored back to us is not the same as being shepherded toward maturity in Christ. The church should also name the category problem gently but clearly. An AI companion can simulate attentiveness, but it cannot offer mutuality, truthful accountability, or covenantal care. The teenager needs to hear not only that the bot is “not real”, but why that unreality matters to the God who has made us for relationship with each other, and with Him.



At the congregational level, the church should examine whether it is providing intergenerational belonging strong enough to compete with digital substitutes. Teenagers who are deeply known by several adults in the congregation are less likely to seek types of artificial intimacy in the dark, of which AI is just one. Churches may need to strengthen mentoring, pastoral check-ins, family support, and teaching on technology. Where needed, the church should also help connect a young person with professional counselling, not as a substitute for discipleship, but as part of wise care.

Spiritually, the church should frame this not only as a technology issue but as a discipleship issue. Whom do we turn to first? Who is shaping our imagination, our identity, and our desires? The response should call Ethan not merely away from an app, but toward Christ, his Christian brother and sister, and the hard but life-giving reality of true communion. The goal is not simply to remove a device, but to make real human belonging more attractive, credible and available than the simulation.

Presbyterian minister uses AI

Now, let us consider David, a capable and faithful Presbyterian pastor in a busy suburban church. He loves his people and believes the Bible, but he is tired. Ministry demands are relentless: preaching, pastoral care, administration, crisis response, leadership meetings, and family pressures. A friend shows him an AI tool that can generate sermon outlines, illustrations, small-group questions, and Bible study summaries in seconds.

At first David uses it sparingly. He asks it for background ideas on a passage or examples of application. It feels like a productivity tool, no different from a commentary or search engine. But gradually the line shifts. On a hard week, he asks it to draft most of a Bible study. On another, it writes a sermon draft that he lightly edits. Eventually he finds that he can produce ministry material much faster by letting the AI do the first pass.

The results are impressive enough. The wording is

clear and polished, the illustrations are engaging and the studies are accessible. Yet over time, the sermons are increasingly generic, and sound right at first but are not always deeply wrestled through. The sharp double-edge of the text is blunted. The specific knowledge that David has of his flock is missing in the applications. David is still preaching biblical truth, but he is no longer always doing the deep labour of interpretation, meditation, prayer, and application that preaching ordinarily requires.

No one notices at first, because the output is competent, but eventually some people sense that while the sermons are helpful, they do not quite feel as if they arise from the shared life of this particular church under this pastor before God.

This scenario is increasingly plausible. Scotford argues that rising AI use by church leaders reflects not only enthusiasm for technology but also structural overload in ministry; administrative and organisational uses are commonly viewed as acceptable, but uses that shape preaching, pastoral care, or spiritual direction are much more contested because they threaten authenticity and trust (Scotford, 2026). Conrad similarly distinguishes administrative or support uses from uses that displace the more

relational, theological and spiritually accountable elements of ministry (Conrad, 2025). The Social Issues Committee briefing makes a similar distinction by affirming carefully monitored tool use while warning against delegating the kinds of reasoning, creativity, and relational engagement bound up with human vocation and responsibility (Social Issues Committee, 2025).

The nature of the impact

For David, the chief danger is not simply plagiarism or laziness, though those may become issues. The deeper danger is erosion of vocation. Preaching is not only the delivery of accurate content. It is a pastoral and spiritual labour in which the minister is himself addressed, corrected, nourished, and burdened by the Word before speaking it to others. If AI begins to carry too much of that labour, David may remain productive while slowly becoming less prayerful, less attentive, and less inwardly formed by the texts he teaches. There is also a moral risk. If he presents heavily AI-generated material as though it arose from his own study and pastoral wrestling, a gap opens between appearance and reality. Even if no explicit falsehood is spoken, integrity may be affected.

For those around him, the impact may be subtle. Elders may receive solid material but fail to notice a



weakening of the minister's spiritual depth or exegetical seriousness. Bible study leaders may inherit resources that are tidy but shallow. The congregation may gradually consume more religious content while receiving less shepherding. David's family may also feel the strain differently: perhaps he is less stressed in one sense, but more hollowed out in another.

For the church as a whole, this scenario raises important questions about ministry itself. Is preaching fundamentally the transfer of information, or is it a Spirit-dependent act of pastoral proclamation? If churches prize efficiency too highly, they may start rewarding output over faithfulness, polish over prayer, and scalability over shepherding.

To the watching world, this matters as well. A church that speaks often about truth, integrity, wisdom, and personhood will undermine its witness if its own leaders quietly outsource the spiritual work at the heart of ministry. On the other hand, a church that models thoughtful, bounded, honest use of tools may show that Christians need not fear technology, but must refuse to let tools replace callings.

Elements of a pastoral response

The first pastoral response here is not accusation but theological clarity. Ministers and elders need a robust account of what preaching, teaching, and pastoral preparation actually are. A sermon is not just a product but part of the minister's own obedience. That conviction will shape how and where AI may be used. The key question is not whether pastors may ever use AI in preparation. The question is where assistance becomes substitution. A pastor might legitimately use a tool to collate references, suggest options to restructure or improve grammar, or draft a neutral summary of a commentary. But the core and formative labour of preaching includes prayerful study, theological judgement, pastoral attentiveness to the

congregation, and the personal burden of proclaiming what one must himself hear and obey. That labour is not an inefficiency to be engineered away.

At a personal level, David may need encouragement, accountability, and perhaps repentance. If his use of AI has grown out of exhaustion, the issue may not only be technology but overload, poor structures, unrealistic expectations, or isolation. A church that simply forbids AI without caring for the burdens that made it attractive has not understood the problem. The pastoral response should therefore include both conviction and compassion. A more complete and loving answer will not be only "work harder and pray more", but to reform the extant ministry structures such that David (and other pastors) are not crushed into technological dependency.

At the leadership level, churches should develop clear norms. For example, AI may be acceptable for administrative help, brainstorming, editing, or generating alternative phrasings, but not for replacing exegetical judgement, theological discernment, or the pastor's own labour in understanding and applying the text. The boundaries may vary, but they should be deliberate and transparent. A sensible through line is that AI may assist background or administrative elements of preparation but should not generate the substance of sermon argument, application, or



spiritual exhortation in a way that bypasses the preacher's own wrestling with the text, and we present some simple suggestions to this end in section 5.

There is also a place for honesty with the congregation. Churches need not publicly narrate every workflow detail, but they should cultivate a culture where the use of tools is governed by truthfulness. Where substantial AI assistance is involved, leaders should be especially careful not to create the impression of insight, labour, or originality that is not really there.

At the denominational or training level, this scenario suggests the need for guidance for pastors, elders, and ministry candidates. Future ministers will need formation not only in exegesis and theology, but in technological wisdom, integrity, and the spiritual disciplines that resist shortcuts. Most importantly, the pastoral response should call ministers back to the privilege and burden of handling the Word of God. The answer is not anti-technology purism. It is to insist that no machine can repent, pray, tremble, believe, love the flock, or stand accountable before God for what is taught in Christ's name.



A family loses their livelihood to AI

Finally, let us turn to Sarah and Daniel Guthrie, members of your local church with three children. They have always worked hard, lived modestly, and tried to provide well for their family. Daniel works in a logistics and planning role; Sarah has part-time administrative work. Over the last eighteen months, both industries have changed rapidly. New AI-enabled systems automate large parts of scheduling, reporting, customer interaction, and back-office coordination. Daniel is made redundant. A few months later Sarah's hours are cut drastically, then disappear.

At first, they assume it is temporary. They draw down savings, reduce expenses, and start applying for jobs. But the job market has shifted. Many roles like theirs have either vanished or now expect technical skills they do not possess. They begin to fall behind on rent or mortgage payments. Their stress rises. Arguments become more frequent. Their children become anxious and stop attending youth group. Church attendance becomes irregular, partly because of embarrassment, partly because Sundays feel emotionally exhausting.

The family had once been stable, generous, and involved in church life. Now they are receiving food support, avoiding social events, and wondering whether God has forgotten them. They are experiencing not just a financial setback, but the destabilisation of dignity, vocation, confidence, and hope.

This scenario matters because AI is not only about chatbots and companions. It is also about labour, inequality, and the distribution of economic risk. Capraro argues that generative AI may increase productivity and create benefits, but those gains are unlikely to be evenly distributed. In the workplace, benefits and costs are likely to fall unevenly across firms, sectors, and worker demographics, and AI may deepen existing inequalities even while improving efficiency (Capraro et al., 2024).

The nature of the impact

For Sarah and Daniel directly, the impact is material and spiritual. Financial insecurity brings fear, shame, and the grinding fatigue of uncertainty. Redundancy often feels personal even when it is structural. They may begin to question their worth, usefulness, and identity. The loss is not only income, but their role, and a sense of contributing something valuable. If a machine seems to have taken over tasks once associated with skill or worth, people may begin to ask what value remains in their own labour, and God's good gift of vocation (Genesis 2:15) seems to have been taken from them.

For their children, the impact may include anxiety, social embarrassment, tension at home, and an early sense that the world is unstable and unfair. They may also observe how their parents, and their church, respond under pressure. This can shape faith for years.

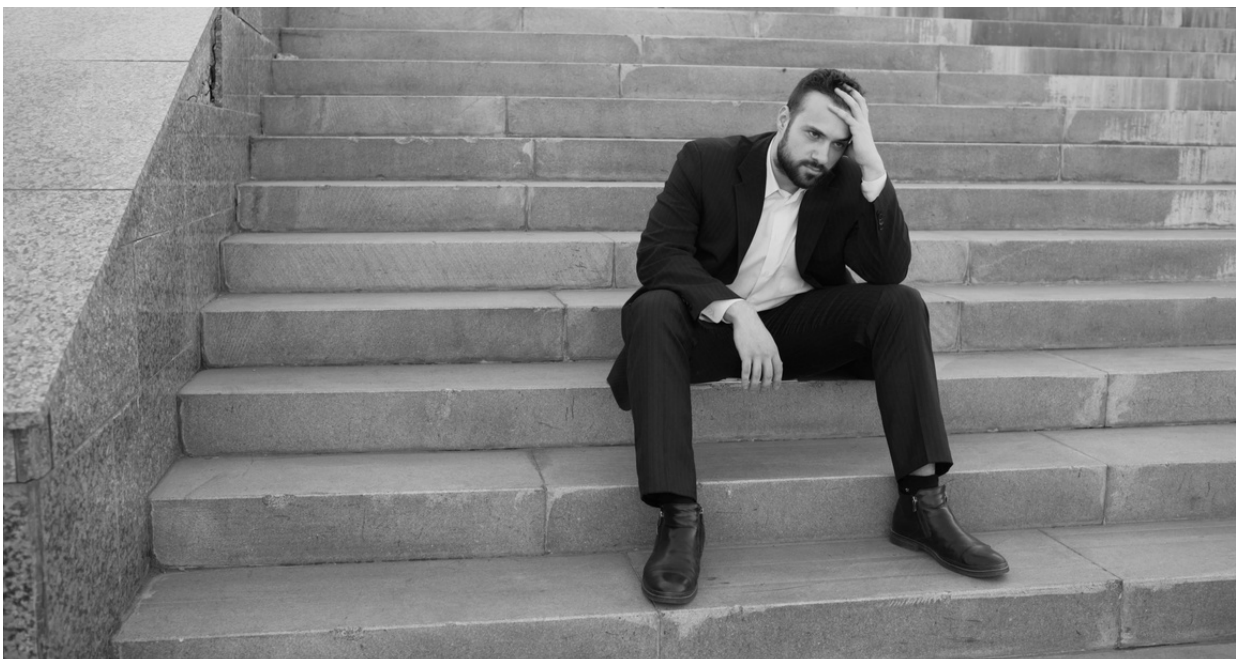
For those around them, the strain radiates outward. Friends may feel awkward or unsure how to help. Small-group members may notice the family withdrawing. Church leaders may face increasing demands for benevolence, practical aid, and pastoral care. If more families experience similar disruption, the church may

discover that AI is not only a matter of ideas, but of local economic dislocation.

For the church this scenario raises broader questions of justice, mercy, work, and vocation. Churches may have been discussing AI mainly in terms of ethics, truth, or education, but here they are confronted with labour-market shocks and real hardship in the pews. But we are called to congregational solidarity and practical care (Galatians 6:2) and to compassion for those displaced by technological change (James 2:15-7), so the issue is diaconal as well as theological. To the watching world, the church's witness may be powerful here. A congregation that notices, shares burdens, supports retraining, and preserves dignity may shine brightly. But if the church speaks abstractly about wisdom while neglecting families displaced by technological change, its witness will ring hollow.

Elements of a pastoral response

The first level of response is immediate and practical. The family may need food relief, emergency financial assistance, help navigating benefits or community services, help looking for work, and confidential pastoral care. The church should move early, gently, and concretely because delayed help can easily deepen shame and isolation.



But material help alone is not enough. Sarah and Daniel need their dignity guarded. They are not a ministry project, and they are not alone - they are beloved members of Christ's body. Pastoral care should make space for grief, anger, fear, and lament. It should also speak clearly of the worth of persons apart from market productivity. In a world that quickly equates employability with value, the church must say something different. Human worth is not indexed to economic efficiency. People bear God's image before, during, and after market disruption.

At the community level, small groups and ministry leaders can play a crucial role by sustaining ordinary fellowship. Families in crisis often disappear socially before they disappear financially. Meals, transport, childcare, job-network introductions, and simple companionship may matter greatly. In practice, churches may need to widen their categories of care: benevolence funds, career mentoring, peer networks, retraining partnerships, and public prayer that names the anxiety of technological disruption.

At the teaching level, this scenario calls for biblical reflection on work, provision, and suffering. Christians need help understanding that work is a gift, but not an idol; that productivity matters, but does not define personhood; and that technological change can create both opportunities and injustices requiring wisdom and solidarity.

At the wider church level, leaders should also begin to ask strategic questions. If AI-driven labour disruption accelerates, which kinds of households in our church and suburb are likely to be most exposed? Are we preparing only to comment on AI, or also to shepherd people through its economic consequences? Pastoral wisdom here will include both mercy for those already hurt and foresight for those likely to be vulnerable. Most fundamentally, the response must hold together compassion and hope. Families

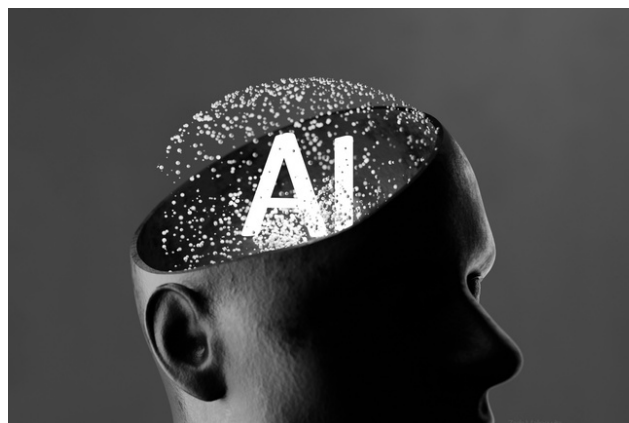
like Sarah and Daniel's need to know that the church sees them, that Christ has not abandoned them, and that their identity rests not in employability but in belonging to Him.

4. Unpacking the impacts

Taken together, these case studies show that AI does not merely change how we work or access information. It has the potential to reshape how we understand truth, personhood, relationships, vocation, and the shared life of the church. Whether we are early adopters or cautious observers, ministers or members, adults or children, we will all be touched in some way by its spread.

The deeper danger is not only practical disruption, but moral and spiritual corrosion. AI can press us to accept watered down versions of truth, care, wisdom, and even what it means to be human. It can train us to receive speech without responsibility, relationship without mutuality, knowledge without understanding, and affirmation without love. In doing so, it does not simply offer new tools but deforms the assumptions by which we live.

We therefore need to look more closely at the ways AI may unsettle our view of truth, personhood, relationships, and human dignity. These are not peripheral concerns, but go to the heart of what it means to live faithfully as creatures made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-7), in dependence on his truth and for communion with him and with one another, and not reducible to particular abilities or behavioural patterns such as information processing or market productivity.



Potential error corrodes truth

The first and simplest impact of AI is that it can be wrong. It sometimes produces false information, misstates facts, invents details, or offers advice that sounds plausible but is poorly grounded. In pastoral settings this matters greatly, because ministry is not only about information but about people, histories, relationships, wounds, sins, and spiritual realities that require careful understanding. AI will often miss these contextual features even when its words appear confident and helpful. Before we reach the deeper questions of personhood, trust, and human dignity, we should recognise this basic point: AI introduces the risk of confident error into contexts where misunderstanding can cause genuine spiritual and relational harm (NIST, 2024; Conrad, 2025).

Replacement corrodes relationship and dignity

AI affects more than accuracy. It can also alter the moral structure of communication itself. Deb Roy argues that large language models make it increasingly normal to receive language that carries the surface marks of explanation, reassurance, apology, promise, and care while lacking a genuinely accountable speaker behind it (Roy, 2026). The danger is not only fabricated facts or confident error, but a weakening of truthfulness as a human practice. Loving and truthful speech in community delivers opportunities for unity and growth, and not just factual correctness (Ephesians 4:15-25). But



without habitual true and accountable speech, words begin to float free from ownership, and statements crafted by AI may sound responsible without anyone actually being responsible for them. Advice carries authority without liability, apology is offered without repentance or liability, and explanation is given without understanding. Over time, this can train people to accept speech that is fluent and persuasive but detached from witness, memory, and answerability. In that environment, truth is not merely contradicted now and then; it is diluted as a sanctifying and covenantal act between persons (Roy, 2026).

The same dynamic bears directly on relationships. Human relationships are sustained not just by exchange of information but by costly presence, continuity, and mutual obligation. Our words matter to one another because they come from someone who can stick around, disappoint, but return and repair. AI can simulate many relational forms with striking effectiveness. It can affirm, soothe, apologise, encourage, and appear attentive. Yet it does so without vulnerability, without real dependence on us, and without the shared moral history that gives depth to human fellowship.

So, when an AI system responds to an error with a remorseless, almost cheerful, apology, this can begin to recalibrate our relational expectations. People may grow more accustomed to care without cost, affirmation without discernment, and responsiveness without reciprocity. They may begin to prefer the frictionless and endlessly available exchange offered by machines to the slower, riskier, but truer exchanges of human community. In that sense, the problem is not only that AI relationships are unreal; it is that they may tutor us to want less from relationships, and therefore to offer less within them (Malfacini, 2025; Roy, 2026).

The deepest issue may be one of human dignity. One of the outworkings of human dignity lies in speaking in one's own voice, being recognisable across time, and bearing responsibility for one's words. A word spoken as a human being is not

merely to generate plausible sentences, but an act to which we will be held to account. It is to disclose oneself under conditions of risk. We can be misunderstood, judged, exposed, corrected, or reconciled. To be “given ... dominion” (Psalms 8:3-6) is to become responsible, and the consequential vulnerability is not incidental to human action and communication; it is one of the things that gives it moral weight. When speech is increasingly outsourced to AI, that weight is reduced. A person may still sound thoughtful, caring, competent, or wise, but the words are no longer fully theirs in the same way. Efficiency is gained, but authorship is weakened. As Dan Brooks puts it in a related context, written communication often carries a “proof of work” function that demonstrates care and commitment; generative AI can short-circuit that social meaning when it offers the appearance of care without the labour of caring (Brooks, 2026). The result is not simply a technological convenience. It may become a subtle abdication of one of the ordinary practices by which human beings inhabit responsibility and honour one another as persons.

This also helps explain why the issue is theological as well as social. Christians believe that persons are not interchangeable processors of language. We are God’s image bearers, in relationship with him and called to truthfulness, covenantal fidelity, and neighbour love. Our

speech is meant to be answerable speech. It belongs within relationships of trust, repentance, forgiveness, and responsibility before God and one another. If AI habituates us to words without ownership, care without presence, and expression without accountability, then the harm reaches beyond misinformation or awkward dependence. It touches the habits by which a people learn to be truthful, relational, and morally serious. The danger is not only that machines now speak. It is that human beings may become increasingly comfortable with speech detached from consequence, and so may slowly surrender the dignity of standing behind their own words.

Simulation corrodes personhood

AI not only changes what we do and how we relate, but can begin to change how we understand who we are. One of its deeper effects is on our sense of personhood, because AI increasingly presents itself not merely as a tool that serves human purposes, but as a system that interprets, predicts, reflects, and subtly shapes the self. In this way, AI can become a kind of co-author of identity. Rather than identity being formed chiefly through embodied relationships, memory, moral struggle, culture, and reflection before God, it is increasingly co-constructed with algorithmic systems that classify our preferences, anticipate our reactions, and feed back to us a machine-readable version of ourselves (Joseph, 2025).



This alters the way self-knowledge is acquired. Instead of knowing ourselves through introspection, conversation, and lived experience, we can begin to know ourselves through dashboards, recommendations, mood trackers, summaries, and algorithmic interpretations. The self is externalised. What once required contemplation may now be presented to us as a data pattern. There can be real convenience in this, and sometimes even genuine insight, but it also carries a subtle danger: the inward work of self-examination may be weakened when interpretation is delegated too readily to a machine. Practices such as journaling, solitude, therapy, prayerful reflection, and honest conversation are not merely inefficient ways of gaining information about ourselves. They are part of the formation of mature persons. If AI begins to replace rather than support these practices, it may erode the depth that such reflection helps to cultivate (Joseph, 2025).

Related to this is a growing reliance on algorithmic authority. Machine assessments can feel objective, neutral, and therefore more trustworthy than our own contested experience. A person may come to believe the system's reading of their mood, aptitude, or personality more readily than their own judgement or the discernment of those who know them well. When this happens, the algorithm is not simply describing the self; it begins to authorise it. The person can be subtly trained to receive identity as classification. Research on algorithmic summaries such as Spotify Wrapped[3] illustrates this dynamic: users may critically reflect on such summaries, yet still receive them as meaningful descriptions of who they are (Annabell & Rasmussen, 2024).

Over time, feedback loops may harden this effect. If a system repeatedly presents someone to themselves as anxious, introverted, low-energy, high-performing, or otherwise typable, these categories may become fixed in the

imagination. The possibility of growth, contradiction, repentance, surprise, and transformation can be narrowed by repeated algorithmic reinforcement. Research on AI classification failures sharpens the concern further: when systems constrain how persons can represent themselves, they can undermine autonomy over self-representation and thereby impinge on dignity (Aizenberg et al., 2025; Gonçalves et al., 2025).

AI can also flatten individuality by standardising expression. Predictive text, recommendation engines, and optimisation systems tend to reward what is legible, familiar, and likely to perform well. This can subtly homogenise tone, taste, and behaviour within and between people groups. People may still feel expressive and free, but their choices may already have been narrowed by systems that channel them toward options consistent with past behaviour. This produces an illusion of choice: the experience of freedom within paths that have already been pre-shaped. In such a world, agency is not usually overthrown dramatically; it is weakened by a thousand small nudges (Joseph, 2025).

This dynamic is intensified by the reduction of selfhood to metrics. The “quantified self” promises clarity through measurement: sleep scores, productivity dashboards, emotional ratings, engagement counts, and behavioural indicators. Such tools can illuminate patterns that might otherwise be missed. Yet they also tempt us to confuse what is measurable with what is most real.



Subjective experience, moral depth, relational presence, grief, delight, repentance, wisdom, and love do not sit neatly within numerical systems. When identity becomes metric-driven, self-worth can become tied to performance indicators, and failure to meet algorithmic standards may generate shame, stress, or alienation from one's embodied life. A person may feel not only observed, but scored (Joseph, 2025).

The emotional life is also affected. Sentiment-aware systems can encourage emotional delegation, where people increasingly rely on AI to interpret, process, or regulate their feelings. This may make emotional language more available and lower barriers to reflection, which can be beneficial. But it may also reduce emotional complexity if users start to fit their feelings into the categories the system recognises best. In time, emotional expression itself can become conditioned by algorithmic expectations, with users unconsciously learning to speak in ways that the machine can easily register or reward. The result may be not deeper honesty, but a more manageable and less textured emotional life (Joseph, 2025; NIST, 2024).

At the level of memory and narrative, AI can further displace the human task of telling the story of one's own life. If systems increasingly organise our memories, select our highlights, surface some moments, and ignore others, then the stories by which we understand ourselves may become algorithmically curated rather than

reflectively composed. This matters because human identity is deeply narrative. We do not simply possess traits; we interpret our lives as stories marked by change, contradiction, suffering, hope, and grace. AI-curated narrative may flatten these complexities by privileging the memorable, the measurable, or the engaging. In doing so, it can diminish narrative agency: our authorship over the story we tell about ourselves (Joseph, 2025).

The result is a more fragmented self. Instead of being grounded in a coherent inner centre, identity can become dispersed across platforms, profiles, interfaces, and data trails. The self is assembled across infrastructures and mediated through systems that know us in pieces. And because these systems are shaped by commercial incentives, cultural assumptions, and embedded biases, this mediated self is never neutral. The digital self does not merely reflect who we are; it is partly shaped by what the external AI system is designed to notice, reward, and promote (Joseph, 2025; Aizenberg et al., 2025).

Yet this need not be the whole story. AI can also, when used consciously and modestly, support reflection rather than replace it. It can prompt self-examination, widen access to therapeutic and educational resources, and help some users articulate patterns in their lives that they had struggled to name. Used wisely, it may scaffold reflection and deepen awareness. But this depends on preserving a crucial moral and theological distinction: AI may assist the work of self-understanding, but it cannot bear the weight of defining the self. Human personhood is not finally a data construct, a behavioural profile, or a predictive pattern. It is relational, embodied, morally significant, and given by God. For that reason, the central pastoral question is not simply whether AI can help us know ourselves, but whether its use forms persons who remain capable of truthful self-examination, responsible agency, rich relationships, and receptive dependence on God rather than on machines.



5. Useful boundaries

Of course, understanding the potential impacts is not enough, and the church needs more than general caution. It needs practical boundaries that distinguish appropriate assistance from inappropriate substitution. The broad guidance in Table 1 below is an example of the boundaries a church might set. It is intentionally simple, and is written for ministry contexts in which time pressure, enthusiasm and ambiguity often blur moral lines.

A wise church will develop guidelines that make sense in their own circumstances after prayer and reflection, shaped by the Word, and some of the relevant biblical principles are listed in the third column.

Table 1: An example breakdown of uses for AI in church, long with some of the biblical principles which can guide the church

Area of Ministry	Exemplar Acceptable Use Cases	Exemplar Unacceptable Use Cases	Suggested Biblical Principles
1. Sermon preparation	- Background help such as transcription, grammar, routine editing - Basic summaries of public-domain or pastor-supplied material - Administrative organisation of notes.	Generating the substance of the sermon, argument, application or exhortation in ways that bypass the preacher's own study, prayer and judgement.	- We remain personally accountable before God to handle Scripture faithfully and truthfully (2 Timothy 2:15). - Teachers bear a stricter responsibility, so the sermon must remain the work of a called and accountable human preacher (James 3:1).
2. Bible studies and teaching notes	- Drafting logistics, handout formatting, question ordering, and plain-language restatement - Always ensure this is then carefully reviewed.	Using AI as an unvetted theological author or allowing generated studies to stand without serious human scrutiny and ownership.	- Elders must watch both their life and doctrine closely (1 Timothy 4:16). - Teachers are accountable for teaching sound doctrine (Titus 2:1).
3. Pastoral counselling	- Administrative support such as appointment summaries written from pastor-approved notes, or resource lists - All checked by a human pastor.	Delegating pastoral counsel, crisis response, confession-like disclosures, trauma care, marriage advice or spiritual direction to AI systems.	- Care for our church families must be personal, gentle, relational, and sacrificial, not merely informational (1 Thessalonians 2:7–8). - We are to bear one another's burdens through embodied human care (Galatians 6:2).
4. Church communications	- Routine copyediting, event descriptions, schedule notices, volunteer reminders, and translation assistance - All checked by a human.	- Publishing fabricated quotes, synthetic testimonies, misleading images, or AI-generated communications - Anything presented as personal pastoral speech when it is not.	- Christian communication must be truthful and transparent, not misleading or fabricated (Ephesians 4:25). - We are responsible for clear, accurate and straightforward communication (2 Corinthians 4:2).
5. Prayer and worship	Very limited brainstorming for neutral logistics, such as service run-sheet wording.	- Using AI to compose prayers or liturgical acts as a substitute for the church's own praying - Presenting AI-generated spiritual language as though it arose from the congregation's own faith and devotion.	- Our worship is in spirit and truth, not just polished religious wording (John 4:24). - Prayer depends on the Spirit's help and the real prayerful response of God's people (Romans 8:26–27).

Three primary principles sit behind these example guidelines, namely:

- **Truthfulness:** ministry speech must be honest, owned, and free from deceptive appearance.
- **Accountability:** those entrusted with teaching, care, and public ministry must remain personally responsible before God and the church.

• **Sincere Love:** we are called to meet our church families with embodied, truthful, and answerable care rather than the simulation of care without obligation.

A few additional observations. Item 3 on the list, counselling, requires special care. Capraro notes that people feel more heard when they believe a response comes from a human than from a machine, and that knowledge of machine interaction can change behaviour in morally significant ways (Capraro et al., 2024). In pastoral settings, this should reinforce the case against outsourcing care. A distressed church member may need careful listening, confidentiality, memory, embodied presence and accountable judgement. No chatbot can shoulder, or can be seen to be shouldering, that sensitive task.

Church communications deserve a different but related warning. Because generative systems can fabricate with confidence, any use of AI in church communications should be checked for accuracy, attribution and tone. A church should be especially resistant to fake testimonials, synthetic images that imply real events, or seemingly personal pastoral messages that are in fact largely machine generated. Trust, once eroded, is hard to restore.

6. Forming wise church culture

To respond wisely, churches will need a deliberate, consultative process by which ministers, elders, parents, ministry leaders, and congregations together learn how to recognise AI's pressures and respond faithfully. In this way, the goal is not simply to have a view about AI, but to form a wise church culture: one able to meet technological change with truthfulness, steadiness, compassion, and a clear commitment to human life as God has made it.

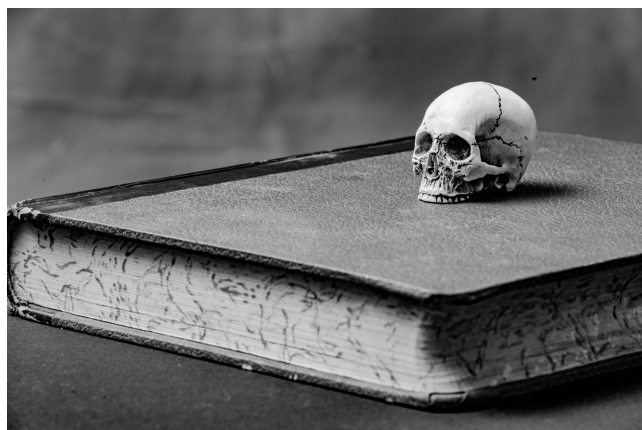
Look out for direct impacts

Each church should begin by asking how these pressures might already be affecting our congregations. AI will not affect every member in the same way. In some churches, the more immediate issue may be job disruption, financial strain, or educational pressures. In others, it may be loneliness, AI companionship, misinformation, pornography, or unwise ministry use. A wise church will therefore pay attention to its own local church family so that it can recognise where particular risks, temptations, or harms may already be emerging. Faithful response begins with pastoral attentiveness to the actual people God has placed in our care.

We must be ready to care for those whose life or work has been directly disrupted by AI. Some in our churches will face redundancy, reduced hours, stalled career paths, or the erosion of skills and confidence as AI reshapes occupations and industries. For them, this will not be an abstract debate about technology but a personal experience of uncertainty, loss, and pressure on family life. A wise church will recognise these changes early and respond with practical support, patient community, prayer, material care where needed, and a renewed affirmation that a person's worth is not exhausted by their economic productivity or occupational success.

Teach biblical anthropology, early and often

Churches should introduce robust Christian teaching on what a person is, before a crisis involving AI forces the issue. The best preparation is not a technical seminar in isolation, but weaving a clear biblical anthropology into the church's teaching whenever relevant. The church must teach that human beings are embodied image bearers, morally answerable to God, and formed in community. We are not, in fact, reducible to information processing units, and are not just data and preferences, productivity engines, or sources of analysable behaviour. This is essential because much AI discourse smuggles in lesser views of a person, making the difference between people and machines appear merely technical. In contrast, Scripture gives a richer account, marvelling that God is mindful of humanity, though we are small in the vastness of creation, that he has made us a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned us with glory and honour (Psalms 8:4-5). Human dignity is therefore received, not achieved. It rests not in our usefulness, capability, or intelligence, but in God's creative purpose and covenantal regard.



Biblical anthropology thus helps the church resist both exaggeration and reduction. We are not gods, masters of creation, technology, or one another. But neither are we machines, outputs, or patterns to be optimised. AI may imitate speech, empathy, memory, or moral advice, but it cannot replace the embodied, accountable, relational nature of human life before God. The church should therefore ask not only what AI can do, but what view of the person its use assumes and reinforces. AI may be welcomed where

it supports human responsibility and embodied ministry, but resisted where it displaces care, obscures accountability, or trains us to confuse simulation with presence.

The relevant briefing from the Sydney Anglican Synod Social Issues Committee is helpful here. It emphasises embodiment, creaturely limitation, relational integrity and the continuing reality of human moral agency. It also warns against allowing created tools to become objects of ultimate trust or dependence (Social Issues Committee, 2025). Teaching these themes will do more than answer one technology question. It will strengthen the church against a whole family of confusions.

Rebuild human capacity

One of the most subtle yet impactful pastoral harms of AI is deskilling. Catena notes that valuable capacities may degenerate when they are repeatedly delegated to systems that act in our place, especially when those capacities require exercise to remain strong (Catena, 2026). In church life, this may include attentiveness, writing, remembering, studying, discerning, praying, listening, apologising, and having difficult conversations. These are ordinary capacities, but they are not trivial. Much of faithful Christian life depends on common human skills practised over time: noticing another person's distress, finding words of comfort, remembering what someone has

shared, reading slowly, forming a judgement, asking a better question, confessing sin and forgiving another, and speaking truth with patience and love.

For that reason, churches should not only limit some forms of delegation; they should positively practise the human capacities they wish to preserve. Read Scripture aloud together. Train people to pray in their own words. Teach young people how to argue without polarisation, write with care, listen before answering, apologise without evasion, and disagree without despising. Visit the lonely in person. Encourage pastors to write and think from the text, not only around it. Help Bible study leaders resist the temptation to outsource every question, illustration, or summary. Encourage elders to cultivate memory, judgement, and pastoral attentiveness through real conversation rather than relying only on notes, templates, or summaries. Technologies change, but our formation as God's children still happens through repeated practices.

This is not nostalgia for a pre-digital world. It is a sober recognition that human beings are formed by what they repeatedly do. A church that never practises prayer will not become prayerful. A church that never reads Scripture aloud will not become deeply scriptural. A church that avoids difficult conversations will not become wise in reconciliation. A church that allows every act of writing, remembering, thinking, and speaking to be mediated by automated systems will gradually lose confidence in the ordinary capacities through which God's extraordinary work is performed.

This may also become one of the unexpectedly attractive features of Christian community in an algorithmic age. As more of life is automated, optimised, and mediated through artificial systems, many people may come to value communities where they are not treated as data points, audiences, consumers, or productivity units, but as persons who are known, heard, remembered, corrected, comforted, and loved. The church's slow practices may look inefficient, but they are deeply human. Shared meals, public reading, congregational singing,



handwritten notes, visiting the sick, praying with the anxious, bearing with those who are less capable, and reconciling after conflict may become a powerful witness precisely because they resist the reduction of human life to speed, convenience, and output.

Make policy clear, usable and holistic

Most churches will not need a long AI policy document, but they do need a clear one. A practical local policy might cover the permitted administrative uses such as prohibited uses in preaching, prayer, counselling and testimony. Policies will typically also make explicit disclosure expectations, the clear responsibility of every leader to fact-check anything produced by an AI, privacy protections including consent, and who approves exceptional cases.

Our policies must ensure we protect the vulnerable, and AI presents in many ways that are not abstract risks for the vulnerable but concrete pastoral pressures that may well be relevant for your church family. Teenagers, the lonely, older adults, the socially marginalised, and those under economic stress may all be drawn towards AI systems for different reasons. The loneliness literature offers both hope and warning. Some AI interventions can reduce loneliness in some groups and settings, especially when designed around engagement and accessibility (Yang et al., 2025). Yet Portacolone and Feddoes warn that AI shortcuts can also reduce physical and meaningful human connection if used as replacements rather than supports for real relationship (Portacolone & Feddoes, 2023). A wise church therefore asks not only whether a system comforts, but whether it reconnects people to human community or quietly substitutes for it.

At a denominational level, treating AI seriously changes the risk profile of existing policy areas by making it easier to generate, store, infer, share, automate, and misjudge information at

speed. For our church, we also need to ask how AI might change our existing privacy, safeguarding, governance, and pastoral policies. As an example, the privacy regulator has specifically warned not-for-profit organisations against entering personal, especially sensitive, information into public GenAI tools (OAIC, 2023), and the ACNC has also warned charities to consider how AI use affects governance duties and compliance obligations (ACNC, 2024). Following the guidance in section 5 above will go some way to meet these obligations[4], but more work is required to ensure that, as a church, we have exercised our due diligence in these areas.

7. Conclusion

AI is a powerful set of tools, not a person. That statement sounds simple, but the present moment makes it harder to hold than it first appears. The conversational and adaptive qualities of contemporary AI tempt us to attribute mind, wisdom and moral presence where there is only patterned output. That temptation matters because it touches theology, discipleship and pastoral care.

The church's task is not to reject every tool, nor to endorse every innovation. It is to tell the truth about God, humanity and technology, to guard the vulnerable, to preserve accountability, and to form communities in which real wisdom, real love and real responsibility remain recognisably human and genuinely Christian.

If the church can do that, it need not fear this technology in a panicked way. But it must not treat it casually either. The challenge before us is not simply how to use AI efficiently. It is how to use it, where it is fitting to use it at all, without surrendering the human and spiritual goods that the church is called to cherish and protect. As a people called to truth, holiness, love, and embodied fellowship in Christ, AI may assist, but must never interpose, in working out our salvation.

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Endnotes:

[1] The best known of these are the classes of recommendation engines which feed us the stories (Facebook or Threads) we are most likely to connect to, the opinions (Quora, Reddit, Tumblr or Discord) we are most likely to agree with, and the products we are most likely to buy. In each case, the algorithm can make partial communities feel like the whole world, narrowing judgment, hardening confidence, and weakening habits of humility, patience, and real-world accountability.

[2] Note that, while this scenario describes real harm, it is very much at the “beneficial” end of the AI interactions that have been reported. In Garcia (2025) Maria Garcia testified that her “oldest son, Sewell Setzer III, died by suicide. He was just 14 years old. Sewell’s death was the result of prolonged abuse by AI chatbots on a platform called Character.AI” and while this heartbreaking outcome is unusual, it is not unique.

[3] “Spotify Wrapped” is a summary of the users listening history on the Spotify music platform over a year, analysed and characterized by AI. As Spotify defines it, “Spotify Wrapped offers a personalized look back at the audio that **defined your year**. It’s a snapshot of your listening habits, designed to **tell the story of your year** in sound. And sometimes, that story can hold a few surprises.” (italics mine).

[4] Extant policy areas most likely affected by AI are privacy and information handling; safeguarding and child safety; pastoral care and counselling; and governance, cyber, and employment.

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The research and writing for these studies were done by Michael McGarity.

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