

GUIDE

# AI & Technology in Ministry: A Pastor's Practical Guide

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## Introduction — Standing at the Threshold

We are living through a technological moment that historians will likely compare to the invention of the printing press. In 1440, Johannes Gutenberg's movable type press transformed the church forever — democratizing access to Scripture, enabling the Reformation, reshaping every dimension of how the church communicated, taught, and formed disciples. Five centuries later, artificial intelligence represents a similarly disruptive shift in human capability. And as with the printing press, the church faces a fundamental choice: engage wisely and be shaped for greater effectiveness, or disengage anxiously and cede the field to those with less theological wisdom and less pastoral concern for the human beings AI will profoundly affect.

This guide is written for pastors who want to engage wisely. It does not assume technical expertise. It assumes pastoral wisdom — the capacity to discern what serves the kingdom from what merely serves efficiency, what humanizes from what dehumanizes, what empowers the mission from what distorts it. These are the questions that have always defined faithful pastoral engagement with new tools, and they are exactly the questions the church needs to be asking about artificial intelligence today.

The stakes are genuinely high. AI will reshape how sermons are researched and written. It will change how churches communicate with congregants and communities. It will alter the information landscape in which your congregation makes decisions about faith, family, money, and meaning. It will interact with the emotional and spiritual lives of people in your pews in ways they may not fully understand. The pastor who has no framework for any of this is not simply behind the curve technologically — he is leaving his congregation without necessary pastoral guidance in one of the most consequential cultural shifts of the century.

*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*

— Ephesians 5:15-17



## Part One: Understanding Artificial Intelligence

### What AI Actually Is — and What It Is Not

Before engaging theologically and practically with AI, the pastor benefits from a basic technical literacy — not a deep engineering understanding, but enough to distinguish between AI's genuine capabilities and the hype that surrounds it. Many current conversations about AI oscillate between two equally unhelpful extremes: breathless enthusiasm that attributes near-omnipotence to AI systems, and fearful dismissal that refuses to engage the technology at all. Both responses fail the congregation the pastor is called to serve.

Contemporary AI systems — particularly the large language models (LLMs) that power tools like ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and others — are, at their core, extraordinarily sophisticated pattern-recognition systems. They are trained on vast quantities of text data (much of the publicly accessible internet, plus books, academic papers, and other sources) and learn to generate text that is statistically plausible given a particular prompt and context. They do not "think" in the way humans do. They do not have consciousness, genuine understanding, beliefs, or desires. They do not know what they are saying is true — they generate text that is plausible, and they do this with remarkable fluency.

This distinction matters pastorally. AI-generated text can be factually incorrect, theologically confused, culturally insensitive, or simply wrong — while being written in confident, polished, authoritative-sounding prose. The pastor who uses AI-generated content without careful theological and factual review is potentially putting content he has not genuinely evaluated before his congregation. This is not a reason to avoid AI — it is a reason to use it as a starting point that always requires pastoral judgment, not an endpoint that replaces it.

### The Current AI Landscape for Ministry

The AI tools most relevant to pastoral ministry in 2026 fall into several categories. General-purpose large language models — accessible via web interface or API — include ChatGPT (OpenAI), Claude (Anthropic), Gemini (Google), and others. These can assist with writing, research, summarization, brainstorming, translation, and many other tasks. Ministry-specific AI tools are emerging: AI-powered sermon research assistants, church management systems with AI features, AI-assisted pastoral care platforms, and tools designed specifically for theological work.

Image generation AI — Midjourney, DALL-E, Stable Diffusion — can create visual content for church communications, social media, and worship backgrounds. Audio and video AI tools can transcribe sermons, generate subtitles, create summary clips, and assist with podcast production. Workflow automation AI can streamline administrative tasks: email responses, scheduling, data management, and communication workflows. Each of these categories offers genuine opportunity for ministry enhancement, and each carries specific ethical and practical considerations that the pastor needs to navigate.

### The Theological Framework for Technology Engagement

The Christian tradition offers a robust theological framework for engaging new technologies, even if it does not speak directly to AI. The key principles are drawn from a theology of creation, stewardship, human dignity, and wisdom. First, technology is a human cultural product — part of the "mandate to cultivate" embedded in the creation order of Genesis 1-2. Tools, techniques, and technologies are not inherently good or evil; they are morally neutral instruments whose moral character is determined by how they are used, in service of what ends, and with what effects on human flourishing.

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Second, the human person — made in the image of God, endowed with dignity, rationality, creativity, and relational capacity — is always the measure of technology. Technology that serves human flourishing is good technology. Technology that diminishes, manipulates, dehumanizes, or exploits human beings is technology to be resisted, regardless of its efficiency gains. This principle provides the pastor with a clear evaluative criterion for every AI application: Does this serve or diminish the people it affects?

Third, wisdom — the capacity to know what is good, to discern what is fitting, to act with skill in the actual world rather than the ideal world — is the core virtue for technological engagement. The pastor called to lead his congregation through an AI-saturated world needs not technical expertise but wisdom: the ability to ask the right questions, to recognize both opportunity and risk, to model thoughtful engagement rather than either uncritical adoption or fearful avoidance.



## Part Two: AI in the Pastor's Study — Research, Writing, and Sermon Preparation

### Using AI as a Research and Writing Partner

The most immediately practical and most widely discussed application of AI in pastoral ministry is sermon preparation. Pastors who have experimented with AI tools for this purpose report both significant benefits and important limitations. Understanding both clearly enables the pastor to use AI in ways that enhance rather than compromise his preaching ministry.

#### Legitimate Uses of AI in Sermon Research

AI is genuinely useful as a starting point for sermon research — a way of quickly surfacing relevant material, generating a broad landscape of perspectives, and identifying themes and connections that the pastor can then pursue with his own study. Asking an AI assistant to summarize the major interpretive approaches to a particular passage; to identify cross-reference passages on a theme; to list the key historical and cultural context questions relevant to a text; to generate a list of illustration ideas for a sermon topic; or to draft discussion questions for a small group curriculum — all of these represent legitimate, helpful uses of AI as a research accelerator.

The critical principle is verification and personalization. Everything an AI system provides should be treated as a first-draft research summary that requires pastoral verification, theological refinement, and personal engagement before it enters the sermon. AI-generated commentary summaries should be checked against actual commentaries. AI-generated historical claims should be verified. AI-generated illustration ideas should be evaluated for accuracy, appropriateness, and personal resonance before use. The AI is a research assistant, not a research authority.

#### The Ethics of AI-Assisted Preaching

The most contentious question in the current pastoral conversation about AI is whether it is ethical for pastors to use AI to help write sermons. The answer requires careful distinction between different levels and types of use. Using AI to help generate research materials, potential illustrations, or outline structures that the pastor then significantly develops through his own study, prayer, and writing is fundamentally no different from using a commentary, a concordance, or a preaching resource — all of which represent someone else's work being used in service of the pastor's own proclamation. This kind of AI assistance is ethically unproblematic.

Using AI to generate sermon drafts that the pastor delivers with minimal or no personal theological engagement and without disclosure to the congregation is a more serious matter. The sermon is not simply information delivery — it is the pastor's Spirit-led, personally engaged, prayerfully prepared proclamation of the Word of God to a specific people in a specific moment. The authority of that proclamation rests partly on the congregation's trust that what they are hearing is the genuine expression of the pastor's theological wrestling, personal engagement with the text, and prophetic discernment for their community. AI-generated content that has not genuinely passed through the pastor's mind, prayer, and personal conviction erodes this trust — even if the congregation never discovers the source.

A helpful analogy: a ghostwritten sermon is not the same as a sermon prepared with research assistance. The consultant who helps a pastor develop research, illustrations, and structural ideas, while the pastor does the final theological synthesis and personal application, is a legitimate ministry partnership. The

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*ghostwriter who produces the sermon while the pastor delivers it as his own is not. AI falls somewhere between these poles, depending on how it is used — and the pastor's personal ethical calibration of where that line falls is a genuinely important spiritual discipline.*

### AI for Church Communications and Administration

Beyond sermon preparation, AI offers significant efficiency gains in the administrative and communications dimensions of pastoral ministry. These applications are generally less theologically fraught than AI-assisted preaching and can provide substantial time savings that the pastor can redirect toward higher-value pastoral activities. The pastor who spends two hours drafting a weekly newsletter can use AI to accomplish a competent first draft in ten minutes and invest the remaining time in personal pastoral contact, study, or rest.

Specific administrative applications include: drafting regular communications (newsletters, email updates, social media posts); generating meeting agendas and follow-up summaries; creating first drafts of policies, procedures, and governance documents; translating materials for multilingual congregations; generating small group study materials and devotionals; and managing data in church management systems with AI-enhanced features. In all of these applications, the pastor should maintain editorial oversight — reviewing and personalizing AI-generated content rather than publishing it unedited. The pastor's voice, judgment, and pastoral sensibility should always be present in what is published under his name or the church's brand.

### Building an AI Workflow for Ministry

1. **IDENTIFY HIGH-VALUE LOW-CREATIVITY TASKS:** Start with tasks that are time-consuming but don't require your unique pastoral voice — first drafts of routine communications, research summaries, calendar coordination. These are the highest-value early applications.
2. **ESTABLISH A VERIFICATION HABIT:** Never publish or deliver AI-generated content without personal review and theological verification. Build this habit from the beginning.
3. **PROTECT YOUR PASTORAL VOICE:** Be especially cautious about using AI for content that should most authentically reflect your own voice — personal pastoral messages, crisis communications, theological positions on contested issues.
4. **EXPERIMENT INCREMENTALLY:** Introduce one AI tool at a time, evaluate its impact, and adjust. Don't attempt to transform your entire ministry workflow at once.
5. **STAY INFORMED:** The AI landscape is changing rapidly. Subscribe to at least one reliable source of information about AI developments relevant to ministry (not tech hype sites but thoughtful, ministry-focused analysis).



## Part Three: Digital Discipleship and Online Ministry

### The Church in the Digital Public Square

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2022 accelerated a digital transformation that was already underway in church life, compressing what might have been a decade of gradual shift into eighteen months of forced experimentation. The result is a permanent alteration in how significant portions of church participation occur. Many churches now have stable online congregations — regular participants who engage consistently with the church's digital presence but rarely or never physically attend. The question of whether these online participants are "real" church members is theologically interesting but pastorally less urgent than the question of how to serve them faithfully.

Digital discipleship — the intentional formation of disciples through digital platforms and media — is not a compromise of genuine ministry. It is a missional expansion of it into spaces where significant portions of the population are spending significant portions of their lives. The church that dismisses online ministry as a lesser form of the real thing is applying a preindustrial concept of community to a postindustrial world and losing people unnecessarily in the process. The church that engages digital ministry thoughtfully, with clarity about both its possibilities and its limitations, extends the reach of the kingdom into spaces the physical congregation can never fully occupy.

### Building a Digitally Present Church

A digitally present church maintains consistent, high-quality presence across the platforms where its congregation and community actually live. For most churches in 2026, this includes: a well-designed, mobile-optimized website that serves as the digital front door (most people's first encounter with the church); a YouTube channel or equivalent with sermon content that is findable, watchable, and clearly attributed; active social media presence on one to three platforms appropriate to the congregation's demographics (Facebook and Instagram for most churches; TikTok for churches engaging younger demographics; LinkedIn for urban professional congregations); an email newsletter or communication system that maintains connection with members and interested community members; and a podcast if the pastor's teaching ministry has reach beyond the local congregation.

The most important principle for digital presence is consistency over intensity. A church that posts daily for two months and then disappears for three months is less trustworthy to its digital audience than one that publishes thoughtfully and consistently week after week. Digital presence is built slowly, through sustained, authentic engagement rather than viral moments or polished production values. The pastor who posts a genuine, thoughtful 60-second reflection on Monday morning and does so every week for two years will build a more significant digital ministry than the one who produces a professional-quality video series once a year.

### Social Media Wisdom for Pastoral Ministry

Social media is simultaneously the most powerful pastoral communication tool available and one of the most significant threats to pastoral credibility and mental health. The pastor who engages social media without clear, principled guidelines will eventually find himself in one of two failure modes. The first is irrelevance — refusing to engage the platforms where his congregation and community live, which means ceding the digital formation of his people to algorithms and influencers with no pastoral concern for them. The second is crisis — posting something impulsive, inflammatory, politically incautious, or theologically underdeveloped that circulates beyond its intended audience and damages his reputation and his church's witness.

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The following principles have been distilled from the experience of pastors who have navigated social media well over extended periods of ministry. They are not absolute rules — pastoral context matters — but they represent the accumulated wisdom of practitioners who have learned through both success and failure.

**POST WHAT YOU WOULD SAY FROM THE PULPIT.** Social media posts are public statements that may reach audiences far beyond your intended recipients. If you would not say something from your pulpit to your whole congregation and community, you should not say it on social media. This principle eliminates most of the categories of posts that most commonly damage pastoral credibility: hot takes on breaking news, political commentary on contested partisan issues, emotional reactions to personal slights, and theologically underdeveloped positions on complex questions.

**ENGAGE CRITICISM PRIVATELY, NOT PUBLICLY.** When your posts generate critical responses, resist the temptation to engage defensively in public. Public defensive engagement almost always makes the situation worse. Instead, engage critics privately with grace and genuine curiosity: "Thank you for sharing your perspective. I'd be glad to discuss this more fully in a private conversation." This response communicates both confidence and pastoral maturity.

**PROTECT YOUR SABBATH FROM SOCIAL MEDIA.** The same principles that apply to general technology boundaries apply with particular force to social media. The pastor who is checking notifications, monitoring engagement metrics, and responding to comments on his Sabbath day is not resting — he is performing, anxiously measuring his reception, and feeding an algorithm that has no interest in his wellbeing. Turn the notifications off. Let it go for a day.

## **Pastoral Ethics in Digital Counseling and Care**

One of the most complex challenges the digital age has created for pastoral ministry is the management of pastoral care in digital channels. Congregants increasingly initiate pastoral care conversations via text message, social media DM, email, and messaging apps. These channels offer genuine accessibility benefits — the congregant in crisis at 2 AM can reach out rather than suffering alone until office hours. But they also create significant challenges around boundaries, documentation, confidentiality, and appropriate pastoral care practice.

The fundamental principle for digital pastoral care is that significant pastoral conversations should always transition to more appropriate formats. Routine check-ins, prayer requests, and brief pastoral encouragement can appropriately occur via text or email. But any conversation that involves significant emotional distress, mental health concerns, relationship crisis, theological confusion, or pastoral counseling should be transitioned to a scheduled phone call, video call, or in-person meeting as quickly as possible. The text message is not an appropriate venue for pastoral counseling. The Instagram DM is not an appropriate venue for crisis care. Maintaining this boundary — while doing so with pastoral warmth rather than bureaucratic coldness — is one of the most important digital ministry skills a pastor can develop.



## Part Four: AI Ethics, Misinformation & Pastoral Leadership

### Leading Your Congregation Through the AI Age

The pastor's role in the AI age is not primarily technological — it is pastoral and prophetic. It is to help his congregation navigate a profoundly disorienting technological transformation with wisdom, discernment, and a theological anchor that provides stability amid rapid change. This role does not require the pastor to be a technology expert. It requires him to be a wise interpreter of culture and a faithful proclaimer of a gospel that speaks to every dimension of human experience, including the experience of living in a world being reshaped by algorithms.

#### The Misinformation Crisis and the Church's Response

One of the most consequential challenges AI creates for the church is the dramatic amplification of misinformation. AI systems can generate false content at scale — fake news articles, fabricated quotes from real people, synthetic images and videos, and manipulative narratives — with unprecedented speed and decreasing detectability. This capacity is already being weaponized in political, religious, and social conflicts, and it is creating an information environment in which the very concept of a shared factual reality is under threat.

The church has always been in the business of epistemic formation — of shaping how its members understand truth, evaluate claims, and navigate competing narratives. This has never been more important than in the current moment. The pastor who teaches his congregation media literacy, who models epistemic humility and careful fact-checking, who preaches on the biblical concept of bearing false witness in contexts that include the sharing of unverified social media content, is doing essential kingdom work. The congregation that is formed in the habits of careful, humble, truth-seeking epistemology is better equipped to resist manipulation and to serve as an island of sanity in an increasingly disinformation-saturated public square.

#### AI and Human Dignity — The Pastoral Questions

The deepest theological questions raised by artificial intelligence concern human dignity and human uniqueness. If AI can generate text as eloquently as a human writer, compose music as beautifully as a human musician, produce art as visually stunning as a human artist, engage in conversation as sensitively as a human therapist — what remains distinctively human? What makes the human person irreplaceable? These questions are not merely philosophical. They are urgently practical for a generation of young people whose sense of vocational meaning and personal dignity is being actively challenged by AI capabilities.

The Christian answer to these questions is grounded in the theology of the imago Dei. Human beings are not primarily distinguished from AI by their cognitive capabilities — their ability to process information, generate language, or produce creative outputs. They are distinguished by their ontological status: they are made in the image of God, endowed with moral responsibility, capable of genuine relationship with the Creator, participants in a redemptive story that has cosmic significance. AI has none of these things. It is a sophisticated tool — an extraordinary, potentially transformative tool — but a tool nonetheless. It does not have a soul. It does not stand in a covenant relationship with God. It will not be held accountable at the judgment. It cannot pray, worship, repent, love, or be redeemed.

This theological clarity does not minimize AI's practical significance. It does, however, protect the pastor and congregation from the twin errors of treating AI as a threat to human uniqueness (panic) or treating it as a replacement for human engagement (laziness). AI is a tool in the hands of image-bearers. How

*image-bearers use it reflects the same moral accountability that applies to how they use every other tool, power, and resource entrusted to them by God.*

### Preaching and Teaching on Technology

The pastor who has not yet addressed AI and technology explicitly from the pulpit is missing a pastoral opportunity of significant magnitude. His congregation is already navigating these waters — using AI tools, consuming AI-generated content, facing AI-related challenges in their workplaces and families, asking questions about what it means to be human in an age of intelligent machines. The church that is silent on these questions is not being neutral — it is ceding the formation of its people on these questions to tech companies, cultural commentators, and YouTube influencers.

A pastoral teaching series on technology might address: the theology of technology and human stewardship; wisdom and discernment in the digital age; social media and the formation of identity; AI and human dignity; digital addiction and the recovery of embodied presence; truth-telling and media literacy; and the church as a community of analog depth in a digital-surface world. These are not secular topics with a thin spiritual veneer — they are genuinely theological topics with profound implications for how Christians understand themselves, their calling, and their responsibility to their neighbors.

### The Future of AI in Ministry — Preparing for What Is Coming

The AI capabilities available in 2026 represent not the endpoint but an early chapter of a transformation that will continue accelerating for the foreseeable future. The pastor who thinks he has "figured out AI" with his current toolkit will find himself needing to recalibrate regularly as new capabilities emerge, new ethical questions arise, and new opportunities and threats materialize. Remaining in learning posture — staying curious, reading widely, engaging both enthusiastic early adopters and thoughtful critics, and continuously returning to the theological and ethical framework — is the pastoral posture appropriate to a rapidly evolving landscape.

The most important preparation for AI's continued development is not technological but spiritual: cultivating the inner depth, the theological rootedness, the relational richness, and the epistemic humility that will enable the pastor to continue leading wisely through whatever comes next. The pastor who is deeply formed in the wisdom tradition of the Christian faith, who knows how to ask "What is this for? Who does this serve? What does it produce in human lives?" — that pastor will navigate whatever AI becomes in the years ahead with the same pastoral discernment that has served God's people in every previous technological revolution.

*And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.*

— Philipians 1:9-10

*"The pastor who navigates AI and technology with wisdom — using it where it serves, resisting it where it doesn't, and helping his congregation do the same — is practicing one of the most important forms of prophetic ministry available in the twenty-first century." — James Bell*

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