

The Ultimate Guide to A.I., Pastors, and the Church

"The Ultimate Guide to A.I., Pastors, and the Church" is written by Carey Nieuwhof and Kenny Jahng. Carey Nieuwhof is a bestselling author and founder of [The Art of Leadership Academy](#). Kenny Jahng is the editor-in-chief of [ChurchTechToday.com](#).

As you may have noticed, ChatGPT and Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) have consistently made headlines over the last couple of months.

Although we rely on A.I. in so much of our daily living today sight unseen, the latest A.I. innovations promise to become much more visible and pervasive than ever before.

Generative A.I. is what's causing all the buzz.

What's generative A.I.?

Well, why not ask ChatGPT what "generative A.I." is?
So we did.

ChatGPT replied that generative A.I. "refers to a type of artificial intelligence that has the ability to create original content or outputs, such as images, text, music, or even videos. Unlike other types of A.I. that are designed to complete specific tasks, generative A.I. is programmed to learn and create on its own, using algorithms and neural networks to generate new and unique outputs based on patterns and data it has learned from existing content."

Boom.

Welcome to 2023: Generative A.I. telling you what generative A.I. is.

Even before ChatGPT, though, A.I. has become an increasingly common part of life, influencing many industries, including education, healthcare, and communication. You've been using A.I. for years when you use

Amazon, Gmail, GPS directions, Grammarly, Netflix, or many many other services that use A.I. behind the scenes.

As technology advances, the use of generative A.I. will only become increasingly widespread. The church will not be exempt from this. As a result, the question for church leaders becomes not whether the church will embrace A.I., but *how* the church will embrace A.I.

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That's what we'll explore in this article, including four specific applications churches can use and five questions church leaders need to be wrestling with.

The Fork In Road For Pastors Regarding A.I.

Pastors appear to be taking two approaches to A.I. Some fear and reject technology, seeing it as a threat. This group is either putting their head in the sand or simply avoiding any use of A.I. or discussion of it.

The second group is embracing it eagerly and experimenting with all A.I. can do, and in the process, they're figuring out the best applications for ministry work.

So, which is the better choice?

History would tell us that ignoring technological revolutions probably isn't the wisest choice and A.I. is no exception. Leaders who ignore the future have a hard time doing ministry in the future.

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But embracing AI fully without thinking through the theological, ethical, and existential questions AI poses difficulties too. While, in our view, using AI carefully and thoughtfully is better than ignoring it, that doesn't mean you should do so recklessly.

The questions are indeed significant and the answers aren't easy.

For example, a few weeks after the release of ChatGPT-4, Elon Musk, and over 1,000 other tech leaders called for a halt to A.I. development for six months citing ethical concerns about letting the private sector determine the future of humanity. Notably, Musk is *also* one of the founders of Open A.I., the company that created ChaptGPT and MidJourney). Other signatories also have a significant role in developing A.I.

For church leaders, perhaps the best approach is to study and use A.I. carefully and prayerfully, looking honestly and thoughtfully at its potential, but also being fully aware of its unintended (or intended) consequences.

So, What Is The Benefit Of Generative A.I. For Pastors?

To put it bluntly, right now, A.I. is a helpful shortcut, quickly producing an extensive range of outputs, rewrites, ideas, and creations ranging from images, music, text, first drafts, rewrites, and even videos with relative ease.

Because so much of ministry work involves content generation, generative A.I. easily supports the workflows almost all church staff use every week.

Here are four areas where generative A.I. can help church leaders produce better work:

1. A Writing Accelerator

Generative A.I. can help create announcements, curricula, promotional materials, and websites, and even help with sermon research, titling, and generating first drafts.

This doesn't mean you should let ChatGPT write your message for you. Not only is that a form of plagiarism or 'passing off' another person's work as your own, but the research generative A.I. does can be riddled with errors. You still need to craft the message, but A.I. can give you a first draft, a different angle, or a head start.

The bottom line? Church leaders can leverage A.I. technology to create new content faster and more efficiently without compromising on creativity or quality.

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2. Better Decision Making

Strategically, A.I. can help staff make better-informed decisions in their work. Part of leadership is announcing hard decisions and having tough conversations.

A.I. can help you compose better, more emotionally intelligent notes, letters, and even approaches as you head into crucial meetings, conversations, or events at your church.

For example, try asking ChatGPT to write an emotionally intelligent first draft of a conversation you want to have with a student pastor who isn't taking responsibility for his actions.

You'll be surprised at the surprisingly helpful advice it will offer. The material we've seen ChatGPT suggest is better than what we've seen many leaders say or do on their own. In many ways, using generative A.I. is like having a consultant at your fingertips.

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3. Personalization

A.I. can also help you personalize the interactions you have with individuals and families when it's integrated into your database. It can help many attendees further their discipleship journey in a way that is tailored to their growth path.

Similarly, following up with new attendees or donors can easily become a customized path rather than a 'one size fits all' approach you hope works the majority of the time.

As database managers become more A.I.-integrated, customization will become the default approach of more and more churches.

4. Thought Leadership

Because A.I. is integrating with all of life, using it will help signal to your attendees that your church is both relevant and aware of how to do 21st-century ministry. In the same way music, architecture, preaching style, email and texting strategies, and decor signal relevance, thoughtfully embracing A.I. signals to your church that you understand the world people live in.

As a result, you can become a thought leader, helping your people reflect on what it all means.

And, of course, embracing new methods always keeps the mission alive in ways that resisting them never will.

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Besides, within months of this writing, generative A.I.'s chatbot experiences will become pervasive in everyday life for everyone that attends your church. The people you lead will naturally default to using generative A.I. assistance tools within all of the software and services you use today.

Google and Bing search engines are transforming how we search for things daily. Using A.I. chat functions as a part of Snapchat, Instacart, Microsoft Office, and other everyday apps and websites are becoming normalized at a rapid rate.

As a pastor and church leader, you play a vital role in guiding your staff, volunteers, and community members through the rapidly increasing reach of A.I.'s impact on people's lives.

Being at the forefront of understanding and addressing A.I.'s impact on our lives and work ensures that your congregation is well-equipped to navigate these changes and even reflect on what they mean.

5 Topics Every Pastor Should Discuss With Church Staff

Despite the inevitability and promise of A.I., there will also be challenges, threats, and unintended consequences everyone needs to think through.

Here are five immediate issues you should consider discussing with your staff and key volunteers regarding A.I., knowing this technology has massive ethical, social, and spiritual implications:

1. Ethical Considerations & Expectations

The rapid rise of generative A.I. systems has raised numerous ethical questions, such as privacy, fairness, transparency, and accountability.

There are more than a few [ethical pros and cons related to the role of the preacher](#). Plagiarism has been a [major problem in sermon writing](#) for decades, and generative A.I. only extends those challenges and the honest conversations leaders need to have.

What kind of attribution is necessary when A.I. tools are used to help create content like sermons, curricula, announcements, emails, etc.?

For example, [Vanderbilt University recently had to deal with outrage](#) from the community when a letter addressing recent student shootings was sent out that mistakenly did not remove the notation that the letter was generated by ChatGPT (actually not a good move to let A.I. do your pastoral care without human thought or intervention).

Here are just three questions to consider (the list could expand to dozens):

- Is the expectation of church employees to create all materials by themselves with 100% human-generated content? Much like attribution issues when pastors borrow illustrations or theological points from other pastors' sermons, do staff members need to disclose when they leaned on A.I. to assist with any content to be published or sent to community members?
- Is the spiritual impact compromised if A.I. is involved with writing religious content like devotionals or prayers?
- Is there a gap in the public's expectations vs. what ministry workers assume themselves regarding the integration of A.I. for creating content and resources?

As leaders, church leaders can help their teams navigate these complex issues through open and honest conversations. As church leaders, in particular, we have to ensure that A.I. technologies are used responsibly, transparently, and fairly. Excusing ourselves from the conversation means we can't do that.

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There are so many questions that our culture hasn't fully grappled with yet, so there isn't a list of "right answers" being kept on file. And how you treat the ethical questions will inevitably shape how your congregation handles them in their lives.

2. A.I.'s Impact on Employment and Economic Disparities

A.I. has the potential to displace human labor roles in various industries, leading to job losses and exacerbating existing economic disparities in various industries.

By discussing A.I.'s impact on vocations with your staff and teams, you can raise awareness about the challenges various segments of your congregation may face in the coming years.

An emerging phrase, F.O.L.O. (Fear of Looming Obsolescence) captures many people's anxieties about a future ruled by A.I. technology. The late Stephen Hawking even said, "The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race."

Future predictions about A.I. range from benevolent to deeply dystopian, but the one thing that unites all predictions is that nothing will stay the same.

Certainly, A.I.'s potential includes scenarios that displace entire jobs across industries – and A.I. will present itself more often in pastoral care contexts in the coming months ahead.

This is an opportunity to process together with the entire team and church how to provide awareness, education, support, guidance, and resources for those affected by potential job displacement or uncertainty in the job market due to technology's impact on the workplace.

Remember that with every tech disruption that impacts jobs, many more new roles and opportunities open up too. Even with your staff, you can encourage everyone to explore new opportunities that A.I. may present for ministry and community outreach.

Cultivating a growth mindset in the culture of your church is one of the most meaningful things you can do when it comes to facilitating conversations about the future.

3. How to Strengthen Ministry Through A.I.

As outlined earlier, A.I. offers numerous opportunities for enhancing and expanding your ministry, including data-driven decision-making, personalized outreach, and efficient resource allocation.

By way of further example, A.I. can be used to analyze congregation engagement patterns, build optimized volunteer schedules, identify pastoral care opportunities based on attendance and giving patterns, or personalize communication with congregation members.

Just about every single human-centered workflow can have A.I. applied and integrated in some way.

Discussing these possibilities openly and honestly before you integrate A.I. is one way to ensure you have a transparent, honest dialogue about what's at stake and perhaps think through unintended consequences before they arise.

A second way to approach using A.I. is to treat your adaptations as *experiments*. Testing out new approaches, revising them, retreating on occasion, and advancing on other occasions will help your church adapt to change without making changes you'll later regret.

4. Addressing A.I.'s Impact On Mental Health And Well-Being

The rise of generative A.I., coupled with heightened screen time and digital reliance, has the potential to worsen isolation, anxiety, and depression.

This has two implications. First, you and your team are likely to feel the impact. But second, so is everyone you're ministering to. Addressing these felt needs and exploring the role technology plays in contributing to them is essential.

As you know, social media has significantly contributed to mental health concerns. As A.I. advances, pastors will need to pay even more attention to mental health—their own and everyone else's.

So, why not start now? If you're not discussing technology and its impact with a therapist and a community who can help you process, what's holding you back?

Fortunately, mental health has gradually become more recognized and discussed topic within church leadership circles.

And second, by being transparent about the use of A.I. at your church, you can open a transparent dialogue about the pros and the cons, so nothing stays secret. We're all learning this together.

Fortunately, there is a growing number of [mental health education resources](#) to equip pastors and church leaders in this area.

5. Preparing the Congregation for a Technologically Driven Future

And at a high level, as A.I. continues to shape the future, forward-thinking pastors will prepare the community for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

If you're still thinking the church should avoid the use of A.I. and not lead the conversation, three considerations.

First, that ship has already sailed. If you watch Netflix, compose emails in Gmail, shop on Amazon, or are reading this on your phone, you're already using A.I. So is everyone else.

Second, the ubiquity of A.I. is inevitable. In the same way that once the car was invented, there was no going back to the horse and buggy, there is an inevitability to A.I. that makes ignoring or resisting it futile and stupid.

And finally, and perhaps most encouraging, historically, the Church has been at the forefront of innovation and cultural development.

The church played and plays pivotal roles in fields such as healthcare, education, and the arts.

In recent decades, though, the Church has lagged in embracing technology and other cultural advancements. We often seem to be the last to the party.

The inaction has made churches seem irrelevant and diluted our influence with those outside the Christian community.

If the church becomes a leader in the thoughtful, ethical use of generative A.I., all of society—not just the church—might benefit.

Final Thoughts

As a pastor or church leader, you don't need to have all the answers; however, you can foster an environment where your staff and community members can explore and navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of A.I. and technology together.

Taking an “ostrich head in the sand” approach regarding A.I.’s impact on ministry will not serve the mission of the church well.

By creating a trusted space for open discussions and inquiry, any church can engage with the challenges and opportunities that arise from A.I.’s integration into modern life.

By the way, [joining a community like this gives](#) you the space to have these conversations privately while you lead publicly—and that kind of space is a godsend for most leaders.

Instilling a growth-minded posture will enable your community to adapt and thrive in an increasingly technology-driven future while maintaining a solid connection to your core purpose of Gospel advancement and spiritual development.