

AI & Your Congregation

What these tools actually are, what your people are already doing with them, and five practical steps — July 2026

Artificial intelligence went from novelty to daily habit faster than any technology in memory — and new research from Barna shows the people in the pews are well ahead of the people in the pulpit. This page is a starting point. It assumes no technical background.

Practicing Christians who use AI often in their personal lives 44% versus 16% of pastors who say the same	Took a spiritual or Bible question to AI in the past month 1 in 3 and nearly half say they would trust AI with their spiritual growth	Pastors who feel ready to guide their people on AI 12% while one in three churchgoers wants exactly that guidance
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What AI actually is — and isn't

Tools like ChatGPT are text predictors. Trained on an enormous library of human writing, they answer by predicting which words most likely come next. That is why they are genuinely useful — summarizing, drafting, explaining, translating — and why they can be *confidently wrong*: the fluency is real even when the facts are not. And an AI has no soul, no walk with God, and no accountability to anyone. It does not know the person asking. It will answer a question about suffering, marriage, or salvation in seconds — warmly, plausibly, and without any way of knowing that the person asking is in crisis.

The question this raises for a church

Your people are not waiting for permission. They already use these tools for work, homework, and health questions — and a third brought them a question about God or the Bible in the last month. So the question is no longer “*Should our church use AI?*” It is: “*Our people already do — who is shepherding the answers they’re getting?*” An AI can quote Scripture; it cannot love your people, correct them in relationship, notice what they didn’t say, or sit beside a hospital bed. What it cannot give is exactly what the church has always been for.

Five things you can do this month

- 1 Try it yourself for twenty minutes.** Open ChatGPT (free) and ask: “*Explain the book of Habakkuk to a new believer,*” or “*What does the Bible say about anxiety?*” Twenty minutes of firsthand use teaches more than a year of headlines — including where it helps and where it’s confidently wrong.
- 2 Name it out loud — once, without alarm.** Most members have never heard their pastor mention AI. “Many of us are using these tools; let’s learn to use them wisely” moves a private habit into the light.
- 3 Teach the concordance rule.** Treat AI like a concordance or a commentary: useful for finding and explaining, never an authority. “Test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21) is the whole policy in one verse.
- 4 Protect what’s private.** One simple staff rule: never paste counseling notes, prayer requests, or member information into a public AI chatbot. What goes in may be kept on someone else’s computer.
- 5 Give the 2 a.m. questions somewhere to go.** If people are bringing their heaviest questions to a chatbot at night, the deeper need isn’t a better chatbot — it’s a person, and a small circle where those questions are welcome. Whatever your church decides about AI, build those circles.

About this briefing. Prepared by SmartGroups (New York) — we build small-group Bible-study software and spend our days helping churches think through questions like these. This page is free to copy and share with your staff or board.

Questions about AI? Ask any time, no strings attached: smartgroups.app/contact • this briefing lives at smartgroups.app/ai

Source: Barna Group, State of the Church research on AI adoption — surveys of 1,514 U.S. adults (Nov. 2025) and 442 U.S. Protestant pastors (Dec. 2025). barna.com/research/christians-adopting-ai-rapidly