

AI: Abstain, Imitate, or Engage?

Can the church take up AI in a genuinely different way?

Ryan Dix · www.askmy.church · August 2026

“Test everything; hold fast what is good.” — 1 Thessalonians 5:21

Where I started. After getting my undergraduate degree in Religion from a small Baptist university in East Tennessee, and the abandoned Master of Divinity fellowship I left at the age of 24, I spent nearly twenty years in the corporate world, most of it in oil and gas at ExxonMobil. Now I build AI tools for small businesses and organizations, including churches. My days are split between building with the most powerful technology of my lifetime and wrestling with whether I should.

I started firmly in the “we’re going to usher in the end of the world with this” camp, and the people building it won’t settle your nerves. Dario Amodei runs Anthropic (they make Claude), and he wrote in 2024 that “most people are underestimating just how radical the upside of AI could be, just as I think most people are underestimating how bad the risks could be.” The year before, he and the heads of OpenAI and Google DeepMind signed a statement naming AI’s extinction risk a global priority alongside pandemics and nuclear war. Those are the builders’ own words. This paper is not an argument that the fear is wrong. It is an argument about what to do while it’s justified.

What changed my mind happened in my own home. Our son needed an expensive, ongoing treatment, and our insurance company denied it within days. My wife spent weeks researching and fighting. She learned the insurer used AI in screening claims. So she used AI right back. She used it to learn how the appeals process works, to organize the medical evidence, and to write the appeal itself.

She fought their AI with our AI — and she won. Our son got the treatment.

The same technology sat on both sides of that table. It carried the values of whoever built it and wielded it: a powerful corporation’s on one side, a strong mother’s on the other. That’s the reality about this tool. It isn’t neutral, but neither is it a preordained conclusion. It’s us humans who will decide what it serves, wholly dependent on what we’re willing to invest in building that outcome. And when people have pointed it at good things, the results are hard to argue with. The AI that cracked biology’s fifty-year protein-folding problem won its builders the 2024 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, and its protein maps sit free today in the hands of researchers hunting cures for cancer and Alzheimer’s. Not all the cutting edge is surveillance, weapons, and ads.

Two questions, not one. Every church is actually facing two different questions about AI, and they don’t have to get the same answer. The first one is how we shepherd people who already live with this. Living with it means more than using it: watched by it, profiled by it, nudged by it, in nearly everything they touch. That one isn’t optional, and it’s already inside the church. In a Barna survey this past December, 87% of Protestant pastors said they use AI in some capacity. The second question: should the church itself ever use it, and for what? A church can faithfully answer “no” to that second question. No church can faithfully skip the first, because staying silent doesn’t stop anything. All silence does is hand the forming of your people over to voices that will never give account for their souls.

We’ve already run this experiment once. Smartphones and social media got to our teenagers around 2012. Youth anxiety, depression, and self-harm started surging within a few years, and every youth minister in America watched it happen with his own eyes. Even the Lausanne Movement (the global

missions network Billy Graham founded) admits in its own report that the church has been slow to respond to the digital age. The body of Christ cannot be slow this time. If we are, it will cost us more.

The smartphone put a screen in front of our people. AI technology puts a voice in their ear, and the voice will answer any question, at any hour, with no pastor, or parent, in the room. It doesn't stop at words, either. The worst thing a photo could be in 2012 was Photoshopped. Now the technology fabricates video of things that never happened. It can put a sermon in a pastor's mouth, in his own face and voice, that he never preached. It can put a teenager's face on a body that was never hers.

This spring, on Orthodox Easter Sunday, the President of the United States posted an AI-generated image of himself as Christ healing the sick, then took it down after many of his own supporters called it blasphemous. Even the likeness of Christ can now be fabricated — and worn. Paul charged the church to dwell on “whatever is true.” Helping our people know what that is has always been shepherd's work, and it always will be. But shepherds have never had to do it in a world where *seeing is no longer believing*.

Underneath both sits a third question, the one I'd put in front of your leadership team: **can the church take this up in a genuinely different way — or are we left only to abstain, or to imitate?**

We are not wrestling alone. Traditions that split centuries ago are landing in the same place, and they got there separately. None counsels bowing to this technology. None of them counsels running from it, either.

The Southern Baptists passed a formal resolution in 2023 calling Christians to engage AI “from a place of eschatological hope rather than uncritical embrace or fearful rejection,” and to “proactively engage and shape these emerging technologies rather than simply respond... after they have already affected our churches.”

Orthodox theologians took up AI, personhood, and theosis at their 2024 clergy-laity congress, asking earlier than most of us what a machine can and cannot be.

Rome has spoken from its highest office. Pope Leo XIV explained his own name: Leo XIII answered the first industrial revolution, and the church now faces what he calls “another industrial revolution” in artificial intelligence. His first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* (May 2026), is his answer. First: “technology is never neutral, because it takes on the characteristics of those who devise, finance, regulate and use it” (§9). Second, from the same section: “the primary choice is not between a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to technology, but rather between constructing Babel or rebuilding Jerusalem.”

And in my own denomination, the EPC, a webinar series last summer put the working rule as simply as I have seen it. A church planter on that panel said he uses AI every week for administrative work, but that he refuses to let it near his preaching. **“AI is allowed to be our assistant, but not our authority.”**

What genuinely different means. Not every church use of AI is the same. Tools your staff works with, the research and drafting and administration, can live under that pastor's rule: assistant, never authority. Load, never judgment. Tools your people talk to are a different matter, because the world's version, the platforms, feeds and algorithms weaving AI into everything, is built to hold attention, and attention is what those companies actually sell. You've heard it before: “if the product is free, you're the product.” Anything a church puts in front of its people must be inverted: built to hand them off to a pastor, or a small group, or a pew on Sunday morning. A machine can answer the logistics question at 11pm. It cannot do ministry. That work belongs to Christ, and he entrusted it to embodied people. God did not save us by sending better information. God saved us by becoming flesh, dwelling among us, and going to the cross.

The encyclical says the real danger was never that our people would mistake a machine for a person. It is “that they may gradually lose the very desire to form genuine human connections” (§100).

A product serving as a destination takes people’s time first, and then it starts taking their desire for one another. A doorway feeds that desire. Every use ends with somebody closer to a person. I know this trap from the inside. More than once I have taken to a machine at midnight what should have been a phone call to a friend. Not because the machine was wiser, but because it was awake, and easier, and always there. The answer to that trap will never be a better machine. The answer is a church body so alive that our people can skip the machine altogether, because they’re so tightly connected to God and to each other.

The printing press, soberly. This technology has been compared to everything from the printing press to the atomic bomb. I can’t solve the bomb problem, at least not by myself. But we, the church, can attack the press angle. Because the church has stood here before. The press flooded Europe with propaganda and filth alongside Bibles, and the reformers did not respond by abstaining from print. They printed... a lot. By some counts, a fifth of the pamphlets printed in German territory in the early Reformation came from Luther’s pen alone.

But we must be sober about the difference. The press never wrote a word itself. It only multiplied what was set before it. This technology holds conversations with anyone, at any hour, in your church’s name if you let it. “In the beginning was the Word.” We of all people cannot sit out the first technology with words of its own.

What I’m asking you to do. Let me be unambiguously clear about where I stand. I build one of these tools. I gave it to my own church for nothing. God willing, someday I’ll be able to afford to give it to any church that wants it for free. In the meantime, I sell it, so I can keep doing this work. Weigh everything in this paper with that in mind. Nothing I’m about to ask requires buying anything from anyone. It requires something harder — leading:

1. **Put it on your leadership agenda this quarter.** Not for a vote. Just to start the discernment. Nehemiah rebuilt the wall by giving every family its own section to build. Assign the sections.
2. **Learn it past the point of convenience.** Most of us already use these tools, but that’s not the same as knowing them. The knowledge that matters most is less about the tool than what it *does to you* while you use it. We learned the smartphone’s real cost about a decade too late, after it had already gone to work on our attention spans and our dopamine system. This time, notice what’s *happening to you*, and pay careful attention to what you *stop* doing: the thinking you hand over, the person you don’t call. A shepherd who has experienced, and noticed, the specific tensions with the technology can name them for his people.
3. **Draw your lines in writing.** The easy lines draw themselves. Nobody’s AI is taking your pulpit. The real lines run through work already on your desk. AI can help research a sermon, but at what point does help become ghost-writing? Which conversations belong only to people? Decide where you stand, write it down, and then tell your congregation what the bright lines are.
4. **If you ever deploy anything, measure what matters.** The world’s platforms count success in hours of attention held and dollars collected. Flip that. Count how often the tool hands someone to an actual human being, whether that’s a call made or a name given or a visit that got planned, and evaluate whether what it said was true. A faithful tool makes itself less and less necessary over time, with fewer midnights spent talking to a machine and more phone calls placed to a trusted friend. AI that keeps people talking to it isn’t serving your church. It’s competing with it.

Guiding Your Church's Conversation About AI

Eight questions for your leadership meeting · from *AI: Abstain, Imitate, or Engage?* · Ryan Dix · www.askmy.church · August 2026

This is the discussion I pray every church has. The sons of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel ought to do. That's the assignment. Understand it. And guide God's people in what to do with it.

1. What are our people, including our youth, already using AI for? And has anyone at this church ever asked them?
2. If we used this well, who might it reach that we aren't reaching now? And if we get careless, who gets hurt? How will we notice?
3. Which tasks in this church actually require a person, and which don't? Where exactly is that line?
4. What will AI never be allowed to do in this church? Who writes that down?
5. A teenager with a question they're ashamed to ask out loud, about doubt or their body or right and wrong, can now ask a machine that will never look disappointed. What does that ask of us, not of the machine?
6. What already speaks automatically in this church's name, the reminders and replies and chat tools, and could anyone in this room say exactly where its words come from?
7. Before adopting any tool, will we write down in advance what would make us shut it off, and who has the authority to do it that day?
8. Who on your leadership team will personally learn these tools well enough to lead this discussion in a year?

Last thing. I have three children. When they ask me someday what I did when this technology arrived, I don't intend to say I watched. The encyclical opens with a call I want to borrow: "Let us not be afraid to get our hands dirty on the 'construction site' of our time" (§16). Your church has its section of the wall. It's time to pick up the right tools and build it.

A MINIMUM STANDARD FOR ANY CHURCH AI — AND THE ONE WE HOLD OURSELVES TO

Anything that speaks in your church's name, ours included, should meet a simple bar. It says plainly that it's AI. It answers only from sources the church approved, and it cites them. It says "I don't know" instead of guessing. It never impersonates clergy and never exercises pastoral judgment. Every path it offers ends at a person with a name. It measures its success in handoffs, not hours. And it collects no more data than the church needs, under the church's control, with a named human who can audit it and shut it off. AI is not inherently evil. *AI is a man-made tool that we humans get to decide how, and with what guardrails, we use.* This is the standard we build AskMyChurch to. Hold us to it... and anyone else trying to sell you an AI solution for your church.

Ryan Dix is a twenty-year veteran of the corporate trenches, a divinity school dropout, and the founder of AskMyChurch (www.askmy.church) and Vision Genesis (www.visiongenesis.ai). He is a lay member of an EPC congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee. And yes, I used the AI tools I build to help me research and write this paper... and it still took me three days. If you're interested in knowing what my process looks like — creating the structures, thinking out loud with lots of passion directed at a computer screen, and then arguing with those tools about every line we write until they reflect what I actually believe and mean — I'd love to speak with you personally. I can be reached at ryan@visiongenesisai.com.