DEVELOPING CHRISTIAN FAITH IN A DIGITAL AGE

Integrating AI, Community, and Congregational Formation



FAITH IS FORMED THROUGH

Scripture • Prayer • Worship • Fellowship • Service

AI CAN HELP WITH

Accessible learning • Translation drafts • Study questions • Ministry coordination

COMMUNITY REMAINS CENTRAL

Belonging • Mutual care • Shared discernment • Embodied relationships

A RESPONSIBLE DIGITAL PATH

Listen to needs → Choose tools carefully → Review with people → Learn and adapt

Let technology strengthen relationships and serve faithful discipleship.

Prof. Ir. Rudy C. Tarumingkeng, PhD
Professor of Management and AI Data Analyst | IBM-ASMI
RudyCT Academic Series | www.rudyct.com/cv.pdf

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Abstract

Digital technologies increasingly shape how Christians learn, worship, communicate, and participate in congregational life. Artificial intelligence adds new possibilities for personalized learning, translation, accessibility, pastoral preparation, and the coordination of ministries. It also raises questions about authority, privacy, spiritual formation, human presence, and the integrity of Christian community. This article develops a theological and practical framework for digital Christian formation. Drawing on biblical teachings about discipleship, the body of Christ, wisdom, love, truth, and mutual responsibility, it argues that technology should serve relationships and practices through which faith matures. AI can support learning and ministry, but cannot replace Scripture, the Holy Spirit, embodied fellowship, pastoral accountability, or the believer's own response to God. The article examines digital culture, AI-enabled learning, worship and pastoral care, risks and inequalities, and the design of hybrid congregational practices. It presents a staged implementation and evaluation framework for churches and Christian educational institutions, including safeguards for privacy, accessibility, doctrinal accuracy, and human

oversight. A hypothetical congregational case illustrates how a church might integrate digital tools without reducing discipleship to content delivery or engagement metrics. The central proposal is a community-centered approach in which digital and face-to-face practices are intentionally connected, AI is used transparently and proportionately, and the fruit of ministry is assessed through growth in wisdom, love, service, belonging, and faithful participation.

Keywords

Christian faith formation; digital discipleship; artificial intelligence; church community; congregational development; Christian education; pastoral care; digital ecclesiology; hybrid ministry; theological ethics.

1. Introduction: Faith Formation in a Connected World

Christian faith is learned, practiced, and deepened through relationships and habits that extend across a lifetime. People hear biblical stories, pray with others, receive teaching, take part in worship, serve neighbors, experience loss and hope, and ask questions that may not have easy answers. These practices occur in families, congregations, schools, workplaces, and wider society. Digital technologies have become part of these environments. A person may join a prayer meeting by video, receive a devotional message on a phone, follow a Bible reading plan through an application, ask a chatbot about a theological term, or keep in contact with a small group through a messaging platform. These are now ordinary parts of religious life for many communities.

The digital environment is not merely a neutral channel through which an unchanged ministry passes. Its design influences what people see, how quickly they respond, who is heard, what can be remembered, and what kinds of relationships are encouraged. A live stream may connect a homebound member to worship, while a comment thread may expose a grieving person to careless advice. A daily notification may support a habit of Scripture reading, while a stream of religious content may fragment attention. A

generative AI assistant may explain a difficult passage at a learner's pace, but it can also produce inaccurate theology in a confident voice. The central question is therefore not whether a church should be “online” or “offline.” It is how a community can form faithful people within a world where digital and physical practices continually interact.

The phrase “development of Christian faith” refers here to a process of becoming more deeply oriented toward God and more faithfully shaped in relation to other people and creation. It involves knowledge, trust, worship, character, discernment, service, and belonging. It does not mean simply acquiring religious information or increasing participation statistics. The New Testament describes disciples as people who learn to keep Jesus' teaching (Matthew 28:19–20), grow toward maturity (Ephesians 4:13–16), bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23), and love one another in concrete ways (John 13:34–35). These goals call for more than a digital content strategy.

This article examines how AI, community, and congregational formation can be integrated with theological care. It first describes Christian formation and the biblical vision of community. It then considers digital culture and the capabilities of AI, including both practical applications and limitations. Subsequent sections address worship, teaching, pastoral care, inclusion, risks, and governance. A congregational case and implementation framework translate the discussion into practice. The final argument is that technology can strengthen faith formation when it is deliberately placed in service of relationships, practices, and responsibilities that remain human, communal, and God-directed.

2. What Christian Faith Formation Means

Faith formation is a broad process rather than a single program. It includes learning the Christian story, interpreting Scripture, developing habits of prayer, participating in worship, practicing moral discernment, caring for neighbors, and growing into a shared identity as Christ's body. These dimensions are interdependent. Biblical knowledge without compassion can

become self-protective expertise. Activity without reflection can become exhaustion. Worship without justice can become disconnected from the lives of neighbors. Private spirituality without fellowship can overlook the New Testament's insistence that believers are joined to one another.

The Gospels present formation as a journey of following Jesus. The disciples learn by listening, asking, misunderstanding, witnessing acts of mercy, sharing meals, failing, receiving forgiveness, and being sent. In Matthew 4:19, Jesus calls disciples to follow him; in Matthew 28:19–20, he commissions them to make disciples and teach them to observe his commands. The emphasis on “observe” points toward lived practice, not memorization alone. Christian formation therefore includes both understanding and obedience, though obedience is not a mechanical performance. It is a response grounded in grace, shaped by the Spirit, and expressed in a community.

Paul's image of the body in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 emphasizes interdependence. Each member has a place and a contribution; no member can claim to be the whole body. This offers an important corrective to personalized digital religion, where each person can select an individualized stream of content and avoid the inconvenience of mutual responsibility. Personal learning paths may help people grow, but Christian formation also requires receiving the gifts and challenges of others. A digital tool should make participation more accessible without encouraging the illusion that faith is an entirely private project.

Formation is also embodied and temporal. People learn through repeated practices: reading Scripture, praying, sharing meals, singing, confessing, forgiving, giving, serving, and keeping promises. These practices train attention and desire. They take place in particular settings and relationships; they cannot be reduced to a set of informational modules. Psalm 78:4–7 depicts the transmission of faith across generations, while Deuteronomy 6:4–9 describes teaching God's words in the ordinary rhythms of daily life. Both

passages connect formation with home, memory, conversation, and repeated communal practice.

Digital media can extend these practices into homes, workplaces, hospitals, and distant communities. But the measure of formation is not the volume of digital material consumed. It is the growth of people and communities in wisdom, faithfulness, hope, love, and service. A congregation may use analytics to understand whether a resource is reaching people, but the deeper question is whether people are becoming more equipped to follow Christ and care for one another. A spiritually healthy evaluation asks about fruit, not merely traffic.

3. Biblical Foundations for Digital Discipleship

Scripture does not provide a direct manual for smartphones, social media, or artificial intelligence. It does provide a theological imagination for judging tools and practices. Genesis 1:26–28 describes humanity as made in God's image and entrusted with responsibility within creation. This dignity is not based on technical competence, public visibility, or productivity. Every person deserves respect, including those who have limited digital access, low literacy, disabilities, or little influence in a congregation. Digital ministry that treats people as targets for engagement or data points fails to honor this dignity.

The command to love God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40) gives a practical test for digital ministry. Does a digital practice help people attend to God and serve neighbors, or does it primarily increase the church's reach, prestige, or control? Does it build mutual care or encourage comparison and self-promotion? The Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:25–37) shows that neighbor-love is expressed through attention, compassion, risk, and practical action. A livestream can help a congregation coordinate support for a sick member, but the love becomes visible when someone brings food, listens, provides transport, or remains present.

Acts 2:42–47 depicts a community devoted to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, generosity, and shared life. The passage is not a blueprint for a

single organizational model, but it highlights relationships among worship, learning, material care, and belonging. Hebrews 10:24–25 urges believers to encourage one another and not neglect meeting together. In a digital age, these texts invite a deeper question: what kinds of meetings and forms of presence help a community sustain mutual encouragement? Technology may enable a meaningful gathering across distance, yet it must be evaluated according to whether it sustains the community's responsibilities rather than simply reproducing a visual event.

The Bible also commends wisdom and discernment. Proverbs 2:1–6 links the search for wisdom with attentiveness and humility. James 1:5 invites believers to ask God for wisdom; James 1:19 counsels people to be quick to listen and slow to speak. These virtues are especially important in online spaces where messages can be forwarded instantly and emotionally charged statements can spread rapidly. First Thessalonians 5:21 says to test everything and hold fast to what is good. In a digital context, testing includes checking sources, examining the effect of a message, and asking whether an application is truthful and loving.

The New Testament describes the Spirit as the source of gifts that build up the church (1 Corinthians 12:4–11). It does not identify technological performance with spiritual gifting. A system may help distribute information, but spiritual discernment remains a matter of prayerful human and communal response to God. John 14:26 speaks of the Spirit teaching and reminding Jesus' followers; this is not a claim about machine learning. Christians should avoid language that implies a chatbot receives revelation or possesses spiritual authority. Technology can assist a practice of discernment without being the source of that discernment.

Finally, Scripture binds truth and love together. Ephesians 4:15 calls the church to speak the truth in love, and Ephesians 4:25 warns against falsehood. Digital platforms amplify both truthful testimony and misinformation. Churches must correct false claims, disclose uncertainty, and

avoid fabricating citations or presenting AI-generated wording as a verified biblical quotation. Truthfulness online is not merely a technical standard; it is a form of care for the people who trust the community.

4. Digital Culture and Religious Life

Digital culture changes how people encounter information, authority, identity, and community. Smartphones make religious content available across the day, while search engines and social platforms influence what is visible. People may watch a sermon from a church in another country, join a prayer group across time zones, or follow a Christian teacher without belonging to that teacher's congregation. Digital religion scholarship examines this interplay between media, religious practice, institutions, and personal meaning. It suggests that digital media are not simply tools added to religious life; they participate in reshaping the way religious communities communicate and relate (Campbell, 2017; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020).

This reshaping brings genuine possibilities. People who travel for work, live far from a congregation, care for family members at home, or have mobility limitations may find new pathways to worship and learning. A young person who is uncertain about faith may begin by asking a question anonymously. A migrant may maintain ties to a home congregation while learning to participate in a new local church. A congregation can share teaching resources beyond its building and invite conversation with people who otherwise would not attend.

Digital participation can also become fragmented. A person can consume sermons, devotionals, and podcasts from many sources without forming durable relationships with any of them. Algorithms often prioritize content that generates attention, which can favor emotional intensity, conflict, or simplified claims. A user may hear only voices that match existing beliefs. The result may be religious consumption without mutual accountability. Christian community is not simply an audience assembled around similar media

preferences. It involves listening, disagreement, forgiveness, shared responsibility, and care for people who cannot enhance one's online profile.

The concept of “presence” needs careful thought. A physical gathering offers forms of co-presence, shared space, bodily cues, and unplanned encounter. Digital gatherings provide other forms: access across distance, flexible participation, chat interaction, captions, recordings, and the possibility of revisiting teaching. Neither mode should be romanticized. Physical presence does not guarantee attentive fellowship, and digital presence is not automatically shallow. The relevant question is how a practice enables people to participate in the life of the church and how the community responds to those who remain at the margins.

Müller and Friemel (2024) propose a theoretical model linking digital media use, religious meaning systems, and relationships within religious communities. Their account is useful because it treats media habits as intertwined with community and meaning rather than as an isolated technology choice. A church should therefore ask how a platform changes patterns of belonging, authority, and religious interpretation. It should also recognize that different generations, cultures, and traditions may use the same tool in very different ways. Research on digital ecclesiology after the pandemic similarly cautions that moving worship online does not by itself produce community; leaders must create practices that sustain connection and shared responsibility (O'Lynn, 2022).

Digital culture also changes authority. A Christian may receive theological guidance from a pastor, denominational materials, a seminary professor, a podcast host, a social media influencer, or an AI assistant. These voices carry different forms of accountability and expertise. The speed and accessibility of online platforms can make a confident voice seem authoritative even when it lacks training or responsibility. Digital discipleship must teach people how to evaluate sources, identify denominational perspectives, and distinguish testimony, scholarship, opinion, and advertising.

5. AI Capabilities and Their Proper Place in Ministry

Artificial intelligence includes many technologies, from pattern recognition and recommendation systems to speech recognition, translation, and generative language models. These systems can help churches organize information, reduce repetitive work, and make resources accessible. Generative AI can produce drafts of text, outlines, illustrations, study questions, announcements, or translations. Speech tools can transcribe sermons and create captions. Search and summarization systems can help staff locate materials across large collections. Data analysis may help a ministry team understand participation trends or identify gaps in outreach.

The potential value is practical. A small congregation with limited staff may use AI to draft a first version of an event notice, then have a human review it. A teacher may ask an AI tool to generate age-appropriate questions about a Bible passage and then revise them to reflect the class's context. A pastor may use speech-to-text to make a sermon transcript searchable. A multilingual ministry may use translation as a starting draft that fluent community members review. A church office may automate routine answers about service times while directing pastoral questions to a person.

AI output is not equivalent to knowledge, wisdom, or spiritual authority. Generative models produce likely text based on patterns in training data and prompts. They may invent facts, citations, or Bible quotations; confuse theological traditions; reproduce stereotypes; and present uncertain interpretations confidently. A system may generate a compassionate-sounding response without knowing the person, bearing pastoral responsibility, or remaining available to accompany them. This difference is decisive when the output concerns doctrine, a life decision, grief, abuse, mental health, or a vulnerable person.

Conrad (2025) argues that churches should assess AI opportunities and threats before integration and treats ministry as a complex system whose elements affect one another. This systems perspective is useful: a tool

introduced for convenience can change workflows, authority, expectations, data practices, and relationships. The question is not only whether a model can generate a sermon outline but how its use will affect sermon preparation, staff roles, theological education, congregational trust, and pastoral presence over time. The Vatican's *Antiqua et nova* (The Holy See, 2025) likewise distinguishes human intelligence and responsibility from the capabilities of artificial systems, reinforcing the need to preserve human agency in consequential decisions.

A responsible role for AI is assistive and bounded. It can help people search, draft, compare, organize, and explain. It should not be treated as a final source of doctrine, a substitute for Scripture, or a replacement for human pastoral judgment. Users should verify generated content against reliable sources and disclose significant AI assistance where appropriate. The greater the consequences of an output, the more direct and qualified human review is required. Routine administrative uses may need modest review; pastoral counseling and doctrinal teaching require far more.

AI can also support reflection by proposing questions rather than supplying final answers. For example, a study leader may ask a tool to identify different interpretations of a passage, suggest voices missing from a lesson, or translate a discussion prompt into a local language for human review. This use invites further inquiry. The tool becomes a prompt for discernment, not a substitute for it. Christian communities can make AI literacy part of discipleship: teaching members how systems work, where they fail, and how to use them in ways consistent with love and truth.

6. Personalization and Lifelong Christian Learning

Faith formation spans childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and older age. People enter Christian learning with different levels of biblical knowledge, educational experience, language ability, disability, and confidence in asking questions. Digital resources can help adapt the pace and presentation of learning. A learner may listen to Scripture, enlarge the type, turn on captions,

revisit a lesson, or request a plain-language explanation. Adaptive platforms can recommend material based on a person's previous progress. AI tutors can offer low-stakes practice and answer introductory questions without embarrassment.

Personalization is helpful when it supports agency and opens a way toward richer participation. A new believer might receive a structured introduction to the Gospels, while a long-time reader explores historical context or theological traditions. A youth leader may provide alternative ways to engage a text: audio, short reading, group discussion, visual map, or reflective writing. A person returning to church after many years may ask basic questions privately before joining a class. These pathways can make learning more hospitable.

However, personalization can turn into isolation if every learner receives only a private feed of material chosen by an algorithm. Christian learning is not simply an individual optimization task. Learners need to encounter other interpretations, hear testimony, practice disagreement, and contribute their own gifts. A personalized lesson should therefore connect learners to teachers and peers. It might end with a question for a small group, a service activity, or a conversation with a mentor. Learning outcomes should include participation and relationship, not only completion of modules.

Christian education must also resist treating people as data profiles. A system may infer a learner's interests or struggles from clicks and responses, but such inferences can be wrong or intrusive. Sensitive information about beliefs, family life, health, or doubt should not be collected casually. If data are gathered, the purpose should be clear, access limited, retention defined, and consent meaningful. Institutions should not use spiritual engagement scores to rank members, pressure participation, or label people as deficient.

Pedagogy should combine information, practice, reflection, and community. A useful digital lesson can include a biblical text, brief context, a question for reflection, an opportunity for dialogue, and a practical act of service. It can

invite learners to write what remains difficult or to name a question for a teacher. AI may offer formative feedback or suggest additional resources, but the teacher remains responsible for the learning relationship. Papakostas (2025) stresses that AI integration in religious education must take account of spiritual formation and human interaction, not only instructional efficiency. A comparative study of Catholic religious education teachers in Germany and Poland found both interest in personalization and concern about oversimplifying religious content and weakening its spiritual dimension (Chrostowski & Mąkosa, 2026). The finding is context-specific, but it illustrates why teacher formation and local evaluation matter.

The goal is not to make faith effortless. Struggle, patience, and sustained attention can be part of learning. A system that instantly supplies every answer may discourage the learner from wrestling with Scripture or asking another person. Teachers can use AI to reduce administrative burden while preserving time for discussion, mentoring, prayer, and service. The best technology often makes room for human encounter rather than filling every moment with automated content.

7. The Congregation as a Community of Formation

The local congregation is more than a delivery channel for religious content. It is a community where people learn to receive and give care, share responsibility, and live out Christian hope in a particular place. Its relationships include people with different ages, abilities, social positions, political views, family structures, and degrees of faith. These differences can be difficult, but they are also formative. They teach patience, humility, forgiveness, and the recognition that no individual possesses the whole wisdom of the body.

The New Testament's image of the church as Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:12–27) resists a model of ministry built entirely around consumers and providers. Every member matters, including those whose contributions are not visible on a platform. A digital strategy can unintentionally privilege those

who are comfortable speaking on camera, writing comments, or using newer devices. The congregation should also honor quiet service, intergenerational care, prayer, hospitality, and the wisdom of older members.

Digital tools can strengthen community coordination. A group messaging platform can help volunteers organize meals for a family in crisis. An online directory can connect members who share a language or caregiving need. A virtual small group can include people whose schedules or mobility make travel difficult. A church website can explain how to request pastoral care and what happens next. These systems can reduce friction around practical care. They do not create love automatically; they make some forms of coordination easier when people choose to act.

Community formation requires more than communication. A congregation may have a lively online chat while members remain unknown to one another. Leaders can invite people from online worship into small groups, local service, or one-to-one conversations. A digital gathering should include opportunities for participation rather than only broadcast. A hybrid group can use a facilitator to include remote participants, ensure that chat comments are heard, and provide ways for people to contribute without speaking in public. Design choices communicate whether all participants are valued.

Intergenerational formation is especially important. Children and young people need safe adults, consistent relationships, and opportunities to ask questions. Older adults may contribute deep experience and spiritual memory. Digital tools can help generations share family histories, record testimonies, or connect across distance. At the same time, churches must protect minors from inappropriate contact, data collection, and exposure to harmful content. Technology policy must be connected to safeguarding policy.

Congregational belonging should not be measured only by attendance or digital engagement. A person who watches a livestream silently may be deeply connected, while a frequent commenter may remain isolated. Leaders

should use data as a prompt for listening, not as a replacement for pastoral knowledge. A message that someone has not logged in for several weeks may invite a caring check-in, but it should not trigger automated assumptions about spiritual decline. Human relationships give context to digital signals.

8. Worship, Prayer, and the Embodied Life of Faith

Worship brings a congregation into shared attention to God through prayer, Scripture, music, preaching, sacraments, testimony, and acts of giving. Digital platforms can extend access to worship, especially for people who are ill, homebound, traveling, or geographically distant. A recorded service can be revisited; captions can make preaching more accessible; audio can help people with low vision; a multilingual service can reach members who do not understand the dominant language. These are meaningful forms of welcome.

At the same time, worship is not simply a program that can be transmitted without remainder. The gathered church shares a place, sings with one another, responds to Scripture, receives sacraments according to its tradition, and encounters people it did not choose through an algorithm. Theological traditions differ on the sacramental meaning and requirements of physical gathering. Each community should state its understanding carefully rather than assume that a streamed service has identical meaning to an in-person liturgy. Digital access can complement congregational worship, but its theological status requires deliberate reflection.

Prayer applications can remind people to pause, provide a structure for daily prayer, or connect a group in intercession. Digital prayer lists may help a congregation remember needs and coordinate support. However, prayer should not be reduced to a streak, metric, or automated prompt. The value of a prayer practice is not determined by how often an app is opened. A notification can invite attention; it cannot pray on behalf of a person in the full Christian sense. Nor should users be encouraged to disclose intimate

prayer requests to a service without understanding how that information is stored.

Music and media can enrich worship when they support participation and theological meaning. Projected lyrics can help people sing; translation can allow multilingual participation; recordings can preserve a choir's work. A congregation should consider copyright, attribution, and the effect of constant production on worship leaders. If every service is designed primarily for online viewers, the people in the room may become an audience for a broadcast. If the service ignores remote participants, those members may feel invisible. Hybrid worship requires leadership and planning to hold these forms of presence together.

Silence, lament, and unhurried prayer are also part of Christian worship. Digital systems are designed to capture attention and prompt response. Churches can choose to create periods without screens or notifications, use simple interfaces, and encourage participants to attend to Scripture and one another. Such practices are not expressions of hostility toward technology. They are ways of protecting the kinds of attention that worship requires.

9. Pastoral Care and the Irreplaceability of Human Presence

Pastoral care is grounded in relationship, trust, confidentiality, discernment, and responsibility. A pastor listens to a person's story, notices what is not said, considers the community and context, and may accompany the person over time. Christian care includes prayer, teaching, practical assistance, referral, correction, and presence. It is not merely the provision of relevant information. A generative AI system can produce a sympathetic paragraph, but it does not know the person, share the relationship, or take responsibility for the consequences of advice.

AI may assist pastoral work in carefully bounded ways. It can help a pastor draft a list of questions for a premarital session, organize public resources for grief support, translate a general handout, or summarize a non-confidential theological article. It may support administrative triage by directing a user to

appropriate human contact. But sensitive counsel about abuse, mental health, family violence, addiction, self-harm, or major life decisions must involve qualified human care. An automated service should not imply that it is a pastor, counselor, spiritual director, or divine messenger.

Confidentiality is central. Pastoral conversations may contain information about health, trauma, sexuality, family conflict, immigration status, or criminal harm. Uploading these details into a general AI tool may expose people who did not consent. Churches should make clear what information may be entered into approved systems, how data are protected, who can access them, and how long they are retained. Staff should use anonymized examples for training and supervision where possible. The obligation to protect trust is theological and pastoral, not only legal.

Technology can help people reach care. A well-designed church website can make contact routes visible, list times when a pastor is available, and explain how urgent requests are handled. A messaging system can make a simple request easier for someone who finds phone calls difficult. Accessibility features can support people with hearing or speech disabilities. These functions can reduce barriers, provided that users are not left interacting with an unmonitored bot when human care is needed.

Pastoral leaders should maintain clear escalation pathways. If an AI assistant encounters language suggesting immediate danger, it should direct the user to local emergency and human support resources according to a reviewed protocol. The church must not claim capabilities it does not have or imply that an AI can monitor a person continuously. Staff need training in both digital safeguarding and the limits of automated systems. A human should be reachable and should know when the system has referred a concern.

Jesus' ministry includes teaching and healing, but also presence, touch, meals, and attention to particular people. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) depicts care as concrete action. Digital systems may help identify needs or coordinate support; they cannot perform all the acts of care

themselves. Communities should use technology to help people move toward one another, not to withdraw from the difficult work of accompaniment.

10. AI-Enabled Congregational Practices

Congregations can consider AI applications across several ministry domains. In biblical education, AI can generate multiple question sets, create a first draft of a glossary, or explain a technical term at different levels. Leaders must check content against the passage and trusted sources. In communications, AI can draft event announcements, summarize a public meeting, or adapt a newsletter for different reading levels. A human editor should check tone, accuracy, dates, names, and accessibility. In translation, AI can provide draft captions or text that fluent speakers review before publication.

In administration, AI may help classify incoming public inquiries, produce meeting summaries, or identify calendar conflicts. Such uses can reduce repetitive work, but they should not automate decisions about who receives pastoral attention, financial aid, membership discipline, or leadership opportunities. Those decisions require human judgment, transparency, and an avenue for appeal. Data analysis can help leaders identify whether a particular age group or language community is not being reached, but numbers should prompt conversation rather than determine a person's value.

AI may also support service and mission. A church can map community resources, translate information about a food pantry, or analyze publicly available demographic data to identify unmet needs. Yet churches should not reduce mission to audience targeting. People are neighbors and partners, not segments to be optimized. Community organizations should be consulted, local knowledge respected, and personal data collected only when there is a clear and legitimate purpose.

A ministry can establish an AI use register. The register lists the tool, purpose, data involved, responsible reviewer, expected benefit, foreseeable risks, and a

review date. This simple practice helps leaders see where automation has entered the organization. It also allows a church to stop a use that is ineffective or harmful. The register need not be bureaucratic; it is a means of stewardship and accountability.

For each use case, ask four questions. First, what human need is being served? Second, what task is the AI actually performing? Third, who checks its output and remains accountable? Fourth, how will the church know whether the use has helped? This sequence prevents adoption driven only by novelty. It also encourages the congregation to start with modest, reversible trials and to learn from users before expanding a system.

A small church may begin with low-risk applications such as captions, document formatting, or public-event drafts. A larger institution may create a cross-functional team involving clergy, educators, IT staff, safeguarding officers, and congregational representatives. In either setting, a tool should be adopted because it serves a clearly identified purpose and fits the community's theological commitments. “Everyone else is using it” is not a sufficient reason.

11. Risks to Faith, Community, and Human Dignity

The first risk is misinformation. AI can invent biblical quotations, misstate historical facts, confuse denominations, or attribute arguments to sources that do not contain them. If a church publishes a generated explanation without review, the error can travel quickly and undermine trust. A policy should require verification of Scripture references, quotations, dates, names, and doctrinal claims. Users should learn that a confident tone is not evidence.

The second risk is bias. AI systems reflect patterns in training data and design decisions. They may privilege dominant languages and traditions, portray marginalized groups through stereotypes, or omit local Christian experience. A tool may present one denominational interpretation as if it were the universal Christian view. Churches need diverse reviewers and should state the scope of their resources. When a system performs poorly in a local

language, that is not a deficiency of the speakers; it is a limitation of the model and its development.

The third risk is replacing relationships with simulations of care. A chatbot may use warm language and respond instantly, which can be comforting. But apparent empathy is not the same as accountable presence. If churches direct lonely people to automated systems because human support is inconvenient, they may deepen isolation. Digital tools should help people find relationships and professional support. They should not deceive users about who or what is responding.

The fourth risk is surveillance and data misuse. Engagement tracking can reveal when people attend worship, what they read, which groups they join, and what concerns they disclose. These data can be sensitive even when they seem routine. A church should collect only what it needs, explain its use, set retention limits, restrict access, and avoid selling or repurposing spiritual data. A member's participation should not be converted into a score of faithfulness.

The fifth risk is dependency and deskilling. If preachers rely on AI for every outline, teachers for every lesson, or members for every answer, their capacity to study, teach, and discern may weaken. AI can scaffold a skill while a person is learning it, but should not silently replace the learning process. Education should ask learners to show their reasoning, use primary sources, and reflect on how they reached a conclusion.

The sixth risk is attention fragmentation and polarization. Platform algorithms often reward emotionally engaging content, and religious content can be framed in ways that provoke fear or hostility. Christians may encounter decontextualized proof texts, conspiracy claims, or attacks on other traditions. Digital formation should cultivate patient reading, source evaluation, charitable disagreement, and the ability to pause before sharing. Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering before listening; this remains a timely principle for online communication.

Finally, automation may conceal labor and costs. AI systems depend on data, energy, infrastructure, and human labor, including workers who label, moderate, and review content. Churches should ask whether a system's benefits justify its environmental and social costs and whether its use displaces workers unfairly. Stewardship includes attention to creation (Genesis 2:15) and to the dignity of those whose labor makes digital ministry possible.

12. Inclusion, Accessibility, and the Digital Divide

Digital ministry can increase access, but access is uneven. Some people have reliable broadband, current devices, private space, and confidence with digital tools; others do not. Rural communities may face unstable connections. Older adults may be unfamiliar with platforms. Low-income families may share one phone. People with disabilities may encounter inaccessible interfaces. A ministry that assumes universal connectivity may exclude the people it hopes to serve.

Churches should design with multiple forms of participation. Offer in-person and online options where feasible, provide downloadable or low-bandwidth materials, distribute printed resources when useful, and avoid requiring a particular device for essential participation. Captions, transcripts, clear fonts, screen-reader compatibility, keyboard navigation, and sign-language interpretation are not luxuries. They are forms of hospitality and justice. Ask people with disabilities to help evaluate the service rather than deciding access needs on their behalf.

Language inclusion is equally important. AI translation can make initial drafts available quickly, but it can distort idioms, names for God, theological terms, and cultural references. Local speakers should review important materials, and translation should be treated as interpretive work. Communities should be able to correct wording without losing control over their language or stories. The goal is not merely to translate content from a dominant language but to let local voices shape what is taught and how it is expressed.

Digital literacy varies within a congregation. Training should be patient and respectful, never implying that people are spiritually deficient because they do not use an app. A volunteer can help members access a service or adjust privacy settings. A church can teach families how to evaluate online religious claims and protect children. Support should be available in person as well as through online documentation.

Inclusion also means representation in the content that AI systems generate. If a lesson example always assumes a nuclear family, stable income, or a Western cultural setting, it may alienate many learners. Leaders can ask AI to propose diverse examples, but should review them for accuracy and dignity. Representation should not be tokenistic. It should reflect actual relationships and experiences in the community and in the global church.

The biblical vision of one body with many members (1 Corinthians 12) gives theological depth to accessibility. Members who are often treated as peripheral are indispensable to the body. Digital ministry should not create a premium experience for people with money and high bandwidth and a diminished experience for those with fewer resources. Churches can begin by listening to affected members and building a budget for access rather than treating accessibility as a later adjustment.

13. A Hypothetical Case: A Congregation Builds a Hybrid Formation Pathway

Consider a medium-sized urban congregation whose members include older adults, university students, families with young children, people who work irregular hours, and a growing migrant community. During a public health emergency, the church began livestreaming worship. After in-person services resumed, the stream continued, but leaders noticed that online viewers rarely joined small groups and that some members felt invisible. The church also wanted to provide more accessible Bible study and improve communication in two languages. It decided to design a hybrid faith-formation pathway rather than simply add more digital content.

The leadership team began by listening. It held conversations with people who watched online, people who attended in person, parents, youth, people with disabilities, and speakers of the additional language. They asked what helped members feel connected, what barriers remained, and which forms of care mattered most. They learned that some online viewers were homebound, some were shift workers, and some used the stream as a first step before visiting. A few participants had poor internet access and relied on audio recordings. These findings shaped the design more than platform features did.

The church then defined a modest set of goals: help people engage Scripture during the week, create reliable connections between online and in-person participants, improve language access, and make pathways to pastoral care visible. It selected tools with clear data practices and designated human owners for each use. AI was used to create draft captions, translate discussion materials, and generate initial questions for study groups. Bilingual members reviewed the translations; pastors checked doctrinal content; a safeguarding officer reviewed youth-facing workflows. No confidential pastoral records were entered into generative systems.

The pathway connected a Sunday sermon to weekday practice. Participants received a short reading, one reflective question, and an invitation to discuss the passage with a group. An online facilitator monitored the chat during worship and connected remote attendees to a small group if they wished. The church offered a phone number for people who preferred not to use a digital form. A monthly service activity gave groups an opportunity to put their learning into practice, such as visiting an elder or supporting a local food program.

After three months, leaders reviewed both quantitative and qualitative evidence. They examined whether captions were accurate, whether people could join groups, and whether materials reached the language community. They also invited participants to describe whether they felt known, whether

the study helped them understand Scripture, and what barriers remained. They did not treat clicks or viewing time as measures of spiritual maturity. The review found that the translated study guide was useful but the automated captions often mishandled names. The church paid a reviewer to correct recurring errors and changed its workflow.

The case shows that technology integration is a process of listening, design, testing, and revision. AI was helpful in routine tasks, but local knowledge and human accountability shaped the final resources. The central innovation was not a particular platform; it was the connection among worship, learning, relationships, service, and care. A congregation with different resources might use different tools, but the same theological questions would apply: who is included, how are people known, and what practices help faith mature?

14. A Practical Framework for Congregational Integration

A church or Christian educational institution can use a staged framework to integrate digital tools and AI. Stage one is theological and pastoral discernment. Leaders define the formation need, identify the people affected, and state the community's convictions about Scripture, worship, privacy, and human care. They ask whether a digital tool is appropriate for the need and whether a non-digital alternative should remain available. This stage prevents the technology itself from defining the problem.

Stage two is participatory design. Invite intended users, including people who are often excluded, to describe their needs and test prototypes. A youth ministry should involve young people and parents; an accessibility initiative should include disabled participants; a multilingual resource should involve fluent speakers. Participation should be meaningful: people should influence choices, not merely endorse a design already completed.

Stage three is risk and resource assessment. Identify data collected, likely errors, privacy concerns, access barriers, security requirements, vendor practices, energy costs, and potential effects on staff roles. Decide what the tool may do, what it may not do, and who reviews its outputs. For AI

applications, specify which content needs human verification and how users can report problems. A risk matrix can help prioritize high-impact concerns.

Stage four is a small, reversible pilot. Test the tool with a defined group and purpose. Train staff and volunteers. Make the presence of AI clear to users. Keep an alternative route for people who do not want or cannot use the system. Collect only necessary data and establish a short review cycle. Pilots should be small enough to stop if they cause harm and broad enough to reveal the practical realities of use.

Stage five is evaluation and adaptation. Review whether the tool met the original need, who benefited, who was left out, and what unintended effects appeared. Evaluate accuracy, accessibility, trust, workload, privacy, and formation outcomes. Use interviews and community feedback alongside system data. If the tool is not helping, revise or discontinue it. If it is useful, expand gradually while maintaining oversight.

Stage six is accountable stewardship. Assign a ministry leader or team to own the practice, update policies, monitor changes in the vendor or system, and report concerns to the congregation. Keep a simple register of AI uses and training provided. Periodically reconsider whether the tool still serves the community's purpose. Technology changes, but the church's responsibility for truth, care, and formation remains.

15. Evaluating the Fruit of Digital Formation

Evaluation in ministry is difficult because spiritual growth cannot be reduced to a single indicator. Attendance, downloads, lesson completion, and online responses can provide limited information about reach and participation. They cannot establish that a person has grown in faith, love, or wisdom. A congregation should use such measures as signals for inquiry, not as final judgments. If a group has few participants, leaders should ask why; if a resource is widely used, they should ask whether it is actually helpful.

A balanced evaluation framework can consider four dimensions. The first is access: can people find and use the resource, including those with disabilities, limited connectivity, or different language needs? The second is learning: do participants understand Scripture more clearly, ask better questions, and distinguish evidence from assumption? The third is relational belonging: do people develop meaningful connections, feel able to contribute, and know how to seek help? The fourth is practice: does learning shape worship, ethical decisions, service, reconciliation, generosity, or care for neighbors?

Evidence can be gathered through anonymous feedback, focus groups, pastoral reflection, participation patterns, accessibility audits, and review of content accuracy. Leaders should be cautious about collecting highly personal data. Evaluation should not pressure people to disclose spiritual experiences or compare their faith journeys with those of others. The purpose is to improve ministry and remove barriers, not to rank members.

The fruit language of Galatians 5:22–23 offers a theological horizon: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These qualities are not simple metrics, but they can guide qualitative reflection. Are digital practices helping people become more patient listeners? Are they increasing generosity and service? Are disagreements handled with gentleness? Are people more connected to Scripture and to one another? Such questions encourage communities to look beyond technological efficiency.

Evaluation should also include negative indicators. Are members experiencing pressure to be constantly available? Are online conflicts increasing? Are people confused about whether content is AI-generated? Are sensitive details being exposed? Are some groups consistently absent from design and leadership? A church that attends only to positive engagement may miss harm. Transparent reporting makes improvement possible and builds trust.

16. Leadership, Change, and Organizational Learning

Integrating digital ministry is a change-management challenge as well as a technical one. Different members may welcome digital tools, fear them, or question their theological implications. Leaders should not dismiss concerns as resistance to progress. Some concerns arise from real experiences of exclusion, privacy violations, poor-quality technology, or loss of meaningful relationships. Others may reflect habits that can be reconsidered through patient dialogue. Change is more sustainable when leaders explain the purpose, invite questions, and allow people to shape the process.

A ministry leadership team should include more than the most technologically confident members. It should include pastoral, educational, administrative, safeguarding, and accessibility perspectives, together with representatives of the communities affected. The team should know who has authority to approve a tool, who handles errors, who communicates with users, and who can stop the system. Responsibility that is shared vaguely is often responsibility that is not exercised.

Leaders can frame AI adoption as a learning process. Begin with a limited use case, identify the expected benefit, test assumptions, and share findings. Record what worked and what failed. Staff should be able to report errors without fear of blame. A pastor who discovers that an AI-generated lesson contains a theological error should be able to correct the workflow, not merely hide the incident. Organizational learning strengthens ministry safety.

Pastoral leaders also need time for human work. If AI saves time on drafting or administration, the institution should decide how that time will be used. Will it create more space for visitation, mentoring, prayer, and study, or will it simply increase output expectations? Technology can intensify work as easily as reduce it. A Christian approach should ask whether productivity serves vocation and care, rather than treating every saved minute as an opportunity to demand more.

Leaders should communicate in plain language. Tell the congregation what tools are used, what tasks they perform, what information they receive, and how humans review their output. Invite feedback and make it easy to contact a person. Do not exaggerate AI's capabilities or imply that automation is inevitable. Christian stewardship includes the ability to adopt, adapt, decline, or discontinue a tool for principled reasons.

17. Theological Education and Formation of Ministers

Seminaries and theological colleges have a responsibility to prepare ministers for digital realities. Students need foundational AI literacy: how generative systems work, how they can hallucinate, what data risks they pose, and how to verify sources. They also need theological reflection on human dignity, embodiment, community, authority, vocation, and the meaning of pastoral presence. Technical and theological formation should inform each other.

AI can support theological education by helping students locate concepts, generate study questions, compare interpretations, and practice explaining ideas for different audiences. It can help instructors prepare accessible versions of materials or create low-stakes exercises. But the educational task is not simply to produce polished writing. Students must learn how to read Scripture carefully, make an argument, engage tradition, respond pastorally, and recognize uncertainty. Assessment should reward these capacities.

A course can ask students to critique an AI-generated sermon or lesson. They can identify unsupported claims, observe which voices are missing, check citations, and revise the material with theological reasoning. Students may document how AI assistance was used and explain what they accepted or rejected. This practice makes discernment visible and reduces the temptation to treat AI as an invisible ghostwriter.

Theological institutions should publish clear guidelines that distinguish brainstorming, language editing, translation, research assistance, and authorship. Students should know what is permitted before beginning an assignment. Faculty should model disclosure and verification. Policies should

also address unequal access: students with paid tools should not receive an unfair advantage, and students who rely on accessibility technology should not be penalized for appropriate use.

Formation of ministers requires more than competence. It requires character, judgment, spiritual discipline, and the ability to remain present with people in pain. AI may help organize theological knowledge, but no system can certify a student's vocation or replace supervised practice. Mentoring, worship, field education, and communal accountability remain essential. Seminaries can help future ministers become neither technophobic nor uncritically enthusiastic, but wise stewards of digital tools.

18. Ethics, Governance, and Safeguarding

Ethical governance should be proportionate to the stakes of a particular use. A tool that formats a public newsletter has different risks from one that answers pastoral questions or recommends recipients for benevolence funds. Institutions should classify uses by purpose, data sensitivity, impact, and reversibility. High-impact uses require stronger evidence, qualified review, explicit consent where appropriate, and an appeal process.

Privacy safeguards should include data minimization, access control, retention limits, and vendor review. Churches should understand whether a provider stores prompts, uses them to train models, or shares data with other services. Sensitive pastoral records should not be entered into general-purpose tools without an approved, secure arrangement and a clear pastoral necessity. Minors require additional protection. Consent should be understandable and voluntary, not hidden in a lengthy policy. UNESCO's (2021) Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence provides a broader human-rights and accountability framework that institutions can adapt alongside denominational and local requirements.

Content governance should establish standards for theological review, citation, translation, and correction. Generated Bible quotations must be checked against the stated edition. Public teaching should have a named

human author or reviewer who is accountable for its claims. If a system produces harmful or false content, the institution should correct it promptly and explain what has changed. AI use should be disclosed when it materially affects the content or interaction.

Safeguarding policies should include digital environments. Leaders need to determine how adults communicate with minors, whether messages are retained, how online groups are moderated, and how participants can report harassment. AI chat systems should not conduct unsupervised sensitive conversations with children or vulnerable adults. Automated moderation can flag content but should not be the sole protection. Human review and clear reporting pathways remain necessary.

Governance also includes procurement and environmental stewardship. Churches should consider accessibility, interoperability, security, licensing, energy use, vendor transparency, and the risk of being locked into a platform. Low-cost tools may impose hidden costs through data extraction or staff workload. A theological ethic of stewardship asks not only whether a tool works but what relationships and systems sustain it.

19. Global Christianity and Local Context

Christian faith is global, multilingual, and culturally diverse. Digital tools can connect communities across geography and make theological resources more accessible. A church in Indonesia can exchange learning with congregations in Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Pacific. Migrant communities can maintain relationships across borders. Online theological networks can amplify local scholarship that might otherwise be overlooked by established publishing systems.

Global connectivity also carries unequal power. Much AI infrastructure is designed and trained in a limited set of languages and cultural settings. Theological content may reflect Western assumptions, even when presented as neutral. Digital platforms can centralize attention around a few global voices and make local traditions less visible. Churches should ask whose

knowledge is represented, whose data are used, who owns the platform, and who has the ability to correct errors.

Local context matters for interpretation and formation. A biblical lesson about hospitality may connect differently in a village with strong communal practices than in a highly mobile city. A digital discipleship program should respond to local work rhythms, languages, family structures, patterns of migration, and access to technology. It should not import a model simply because it succeeded elsewhere. Contextualization requires listening and partnership.

AI translation may help cross linguistic boundaries, but translation is a theological practice. Local speakers need authority over how Scripture, prayer, and pastoral language are expressed. Communities should not be treated as test data for a model without consent or compensation. A respectful process protects oral traditions, sacred knowledge, and community ownership. It also recognizes translators as theologians and cultural interpreters.

The global church can share resources without assuming uniformity. A well-designed digital network makes room for mutual learning, translation in both directions, and the exchange of contextual insight. It allows a community in one region to contribute theology rather than only receive it. This reciprocity reflects the New Testament's vision of gifts shared among members of one body (Romans 12:4–8).

20. Future Directions for Research and Practice

Research on digital Christian formation should move beyond asking whether a tool is liked or used. It should examine how different forms of digital participation affect learning, belonging, spiritual practice, authority, and care over time. Longitudinal studies can explore whether hybrid small groups support durable relationships. Comparative research can examine how AI-assisted Bible learning works across languages, ages, denominations, and

educational settings. Researchers should distinguish between general claims about technology and findings from specific communities.

More participatory research is needed. People with disabilities, rural congregations, low-resource communities, youth, older adults, and multilingual groups should help define research questions and evaluation standards. Their involvement can reveal assumptions that otherwise go unnoticed. Research should also document failures and unintended consequences, not only successful pilots. A balanced evidence base helps churches make decisions without being driven by marketing claims.

Theological research should explore how digital practices shape concepts such as church, presence, authority, formation, and spiritual friendship. It should ask how AI changes the work of preaching and teaching, and how churches preserve the role of embodied community. Different Christian traditions may answer differently, and that diversity should be represented fairly. Digital theology is not one universal position but a field of conversation among traditions and contexts.

Practical research can develop evaluation tools that combine technical accuracy with pastoral and theological outcomes. A system may be measured for translation quality, but also for whether local speakers consider it respectful and usable. A hybrid worship platform may be evaluated for uptime, but also for whether remote participants can meaningfully contribute. A chatbot may be tested for factual reliability and for whether its boundaries are clear to vulnerable users. Mixed methods can give a fuller picture than a single engagement metric.

Finally, churches should share responsible practices across networks. Denominations and theological associations can develop common procurement guidance, safeguarding standards, disclosure norms, and training resources. Smaller churches should not have to negotiate every vendor contract or ethical question alone. Shared learning can help the

Christian community use technology more wisely and reduce preventable harms.

21. Conclusion: Digital Tools in Service of Formed Communities

Developing Christian faith in a digital age requires more than transferring existing programs to new platforms. It requires asking how people learn to trust God, interpret Scripture, practice prayer, worship together, care for neighbors, and take responsibility for one another within digitally mediated life. AI and other digital tools can support these practices by widening access, personalizing learning, assisting translation, organizing ministry, and reducing routine labor. They can also distort authority, weaken attention, expose sensitive information, reproduce bias, and offer simulations of care where human presence is needed.

The biblical vision of formation places community at the center. Disciples learn through teaching and practice, grow as members of one body, and are sent to love their neighbors. Wisdom requires testing claims, speaking truthfully, listening carefully, and acting with humility. These commitments provide a basis for evaluating technology. A tool is appropriate when it serves a clear human and ministry need, respects dignity, strengthens relationships, protects trust, and remains under accountable human oversight.

AI should therefore be integrated as an assistant within a wider ecology of Scripture, worship, teaching, pastoral care, friendship, and service. It can help generate a study question, but a community interprets and lives the passage. It can translate a handout, but local speakers review its meaning. It can coordinate a meal schedule, but people deliver the meal and sit with the person who is ill. It can offer a reminder to pray, but the believer responds to God. These distinctions keep digital capability in its proper place.

The aim is neither to romanticize a pre-digital past nor to assume that every new tool represents progress. The church can learn, experiment, correct, and sometimes decline technology. It should measure success not by the amount of automated content or the number of platform interactions, but by whether

people are growing in faith, wisdom, love, mutual care, and service. Digital ministry is faithful when it helps the community become more fully what it is called to be: a people gathered in Christ, formed by Scripture and Spirit, and sent into the world in love.

Glossary

AI literacy: The knowledge and judgment required to understand what AI systems can and cannot do, evaluate their outputs, and use them responsibly.

Artificial intelligence (AI): A broad category of computational systems that perform tasks such as prediction, classification, language processing, pattern recognition, and content generation.

Digital discipleship: The intentional use and critique of digital practices in support of learning, worship, Christian character, community participation, and service.

Digital ecclesiology: Theological reflection on how digital media shape the identity, practices, authority, and relationships of the church.

Faith formation: The lifelong communal process through which people grow in Christian knowledge, trust, worship, character, discernment, belonging, and service.

Generative AI: AI systems that produce new text, images, audio, or other content in response to prompts and learned patterns.

Hallucination: A plausible-sounding AI output that is inaccurate, unsupported, or fabricated, such as an invented fact, quotation, or reference.

Hybrid ministry: A ministry design that intentionally connects in-person and digital participation, with attention to access, relationship, and shared responsibility.

Human oversight: Meaningful review and control by people who can understand, correct, reject, or stop a system's output and remain accountable for its use.

Mediatization: The process by which media technologies and practices influence communication, institutions, culture, and religious life.

Pastoral care: Accountable spiritual and practical accompaniment that involves listening, discernment, confidentiality, appropriate guidance, and continuing human relationship.

Spiritual formation: The shaping of a person's life toward Christian faithfulness through the work of the Holy Spirit and practices of Scripture, worship, prayer, community, and service.

Theological discernment: The communal and prayerful testing of beliefs and practices in light of Scripture, Christian tradition, reason, context, and ethical consequences.

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