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RESEARCH REPORT

CHRISTIAN AI GOVERNANCE

Drawing the Lines

How Christian Institutions Are Setting Boundaries Around AI Use

Research Areas

AI Governance & Human Agency

Human Dignity, Religion & Public Life

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Abstract

A pastor can preach an AI-written sermon. An ordination board can use an AI-detection score to begin a conversation rather than settle a case. A denominational employee handbook permits AI-generated meeting notes to be shared after review without making them official records. These examples show why the question is not simply whether Christian institutions use AI, but what they permit it to do. Drawing on published policies, institutional disclosures, ministers' accounts, and selected public uses, this study examines boundaries around religious authorship, pastoral judgment, candidate review, approved tools, sensitive information, and church records. The boundaries differ not only across institutions but within individual policies, where assistance with a task does not necessarily confer authority over its result.

I. Where the Line Is Drawn

At Good Shepherd Moravian Church, a pastor reported preaching a sermon generated by ChatGPT without revising it. The Missouri Baptist Convention, by contrast, prohibits substantial AI authorship of sermons and other theological teaching materials produced for the convention.[1] [2] The contrast raises a question that reaches beyond sermons: **which parts of the church's work may AI assist with, and which responsibilities must remain with people?**

Other rules address less conspicuous work: employees disclosing an AI-created first draft to a supervisor, or church reviewers questioning a candidate about an AI-detection flag rather than treating it as proof.[3] [4]

Recent scholarship has examined adaptive AI governance among Christian organizational leaders and the pastoral, technical, and data-governance arrangements of a denominational AI agent.[5] [6] This study approaches the question through the work itself: a sermon, an examination response, a parish record, a meeting transcript, or a chatbot conversation. It compares the rules governing such work with selected accounts and examples of AI use.

Human responsibility runs through these cases, but it takes different forms. It may mean composing a sermon, judging what it teaches, protecting confidential information, obtaining consent, or deciding whether a document speaks officially for the church.

II. Sources and Approach

The study draws on purposive searches for two kinds of material: published Christian institutional rules and publicly described or observable uses of AI. Sources were selected when the institution or named speaker, the task involved, and the status of the material could be established. The evidence cutoff is November 12, 2026. This is a qualitative comparison of documented choices, not a survey of how widespread particular practices are.

The sources take five forms:

Source form	What it contributes	Example
Issued or adopted policy or guidance	A stated rule, its addressees, conditions, and institutional status	Missouri Baptist Convention; Seattle; Saint Paul and Minneapolis[2] [7] [8]
Institutional account of present use	What the institution reports doing with AI	The Fountain; Great Lakes; St. John's[9] [10] [11]
Named role-holder account	A person's reported practice or task boundary	Ministers interviewed by *Baptist & Reflector*[12]
External observation of ordinary use	What a public tool did in the observed exchange	CNN's exchange with an AI version of Friendship's pastor[13]
Released artifact with AI provenance disclosed	Publication of a particular AI-assisted artifact and the issuer's account of its preparation	Virginia Conference UMC interim guidance[14]

A policy describes what an institution requires of the people it covers. An institutional disclosure reports a practice; an observed exchange shows what happened on that occasion. A released document establishes what was published, although the account of its internal review may still come from the issuer. These are not interchangeable kinds of evidence.

The reach of a rule also matters. A convention policy for its workers does not automatically bind congregations, and interim guidance is not enacted denominational policy.[2] [14]

For each case, the comparison considers the issuer, those covered, the task assigned to AI, the action required of people, and the status of the result. It distinguishes outside observation from institutional and individual accounts, including accounts from related bodies, and follows AI's involvement in research, initial drafting, editing, and release. The study does not estimate how common these practices are or test their effectiveness.

III. Sermons, Theological Judgment, and Pastoral Presence

Preaching a sermon and writing it are not necessarily the same act. Good Shepherd Moravian Church made that difference public in 2025. In an August 31 experiment, its pastor compared a self-written sermon with one generated by ChatGPT. In a September 14 follow-up, the pastor reported preaching the AI sermon without revision.[1]

Violet Crown City Church conducted a different worship experiment. According to *United Methodist News*, AI helped generate parts of a November 2023 service, including a song and sermon, using prompts and information provided by the pastor.[15] One account describes an unrevised AI sermon; the other describes an AI-assisted service shaped by pastoral inputs. Neither establishes a standing congregational policy. Together they expose a practical question: is the line drawn at composing the words, shaping the material, or delivering it in worship?

The Missouri Baptist Convention answers that question for work produced on its behalf. Its January 2026 policy permits forms of brainstorming and editing assistance but prohibits AI from writing sermons, Bible lessons, devotionals, and theological teaching materials in whole or substantial part. The rule covers convention employees, contractors, and freelance providers performing convention work; it does not automatically apply to independent Baptist churches.[2] Bear Valley Church's guidelines allow research, brainstorming, and editing assistance, but require preachers to develop their own messages and keep pastoral care in human hands.[16]

The Archdiocese of Seattle draws a related boundary around theological and pastoral judgment. Its April 2026 policy identifies Magisterium, a Catholic AI reference platform, for catechetical preparation, theological research, doctrinal references, and faith-formation planning. The policy requires qualified human review and bars the tool from replacing authoritative teaching, clergy judgment, sacramental-preparation determinations, counseling, spiritual direction, or sensitive pastoral care.[7] A tool may help someone find material without becoming the person authorized to teach, discern, or care.

The Missouri Baptist Convention also frames consequential decisions in expressly religious terms. Decisions materially affecting people, churches, workers, or ministry direction require appropriate human judgment, oversight, and *prayerful discernment*; AI may not make or independently recommend them on its own.[2] That requirement, like Seattle's reservation of spiritual direction and sacramental judgment, concerns responsibilities that these institutions understand as part of ministry, not merely as administrative signoffs.

Pastor Matthew Jones told *Baptist & Reflector* that he sometimes uses AI to help outline sermons but continues to read theological commentaries himself rather than relying on AI summaries.[12]

Preparing a sermon, judging what it teaches, preaching it, and caring for someone pastorally are distinct responsibilities. Accepting AI assistance with one does not settle its place in the others.

IV. When an AI Indicator Enters Ministry Candidate Review

AI-detection software raises a different question: what should a church do when a candidate's written work is flagged? Three approaches to ministry-candidate review leave judgment to human reviewers rather than to the score itself.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) offers a useful historical comparison. Its 2018 *Handbook on Standard Ordination Examinations* already provided for plagiarism-related reader review, a decision by an examination committee task group, possible changes to an examination result, and appeals brought by a presbytery (a regional church body). The 2026 handbook retains that structure while expressly prohibiting generative AI from drafting, composing, substantially writing, or producing Senior Ordination Examination essays. A high AI indicator can prompt documented review, and the task group may assign an "Unsatisfactory" result, which a presbytery may appeal.[17] The AI provision enters an existing process for examination judgments; it does not itself determine a candidate's fitness for ordination.

The Oregon–Idaho Conference addresses the limits of detection more directly. Its January 2026 guidance for district committees interviewing ministry candidates warns that a high percentage from anti-plagiarism software does not necessarily show that a candidate used AI to write a paper. Instead, reviewers are encouraged to ask about translation, grammar tools, administrative help, sermon-writing resources, and the ethical questions raised by their use.[18]

Great Plains sets out a more specific interview procedure. For the 2026–27 credentialing year, a **"20% or higher reported possibility of assistive or generative AI use"** prompts advance notice and an opportunity for discussion at the Board interview, not automatic rejection. Candidates may explain their use of grammar, translation, or generative tools. If they can discuss the submitted work fully and adequately, their oral demonstration supersedes further inquiry about possible AI use, apart from a reminder to disclose assistance. The interview team reports the exchange to the full review team. The procedure also acknowledges false positives and false negatives.[4]

The approaches differ. PC(USA) places the issue within examination review and appeal; Oregon–Idaho emphasizes questions rather than accusations; Great Plains gives a candidate's demonstrated command of the work a defined role. What they share is a concern that an automated signal should not substitute for a judgment about the person being examined.

V. Tool Permission, Protected Information, and Authorship

Permission to use an AI tool does not settle what may be entered into it or how its output may be used. The Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis's September 2026 Policy 201 restricts work data in personal or unverified AI services. It requires explicit manager permission for confidential, sensitive, or personally identifiable inputs and human verification before AI output is presented as fact.[8]

The Archdiocese of Seattle similarly requires a written request and documented approval for official parish or school use of an AI tool. Local leadership or designated technical authorities consider vendor terms, privacy, security, ethics, and mission alignment. The policy separately limits sensitive data, prohibits using parishioner data to train public or third-party models, and requires human review before AI-generated material is distributed or used in decisions.[7] Approval of a tool is separate from the limits on what information it may receive and from the theological and pastoral responsibilities the policy reserves to people.

National Ministries of the United Church of Christ sets different conditions for different kinds of employee work. Under Article 17 of its March 2026 handbook, employees using approved generative-AI applications must disclose an AI-created first draft intended for external publication or distribution **to a supervisor** and retain the unedited output.[3] The handbook does not impose that employee requirement automatically on independent contractors or vendors, whose obligations depend on their contracts.

The Missouri Baptist Convention pays particular attention to whether people are represented truthfully. Its policy prohibits AI-generated depictions of realistic people or places in convention materials, while permitting approved technical enhancement of existing visuals that does not materially change or misrepresent the underlying content. Generating, modifying, or cleaning up a person's voice with AI requires **express written permission**, approval of the words used, truthful representation of those words as the person's own, and Communications Group Leader approval.[2]

The sermon provision addresses who writes religious teaching; the voice provision protects consent and truthful representation, including when AI is used for technical cleanup rather than original composition. A tool's ability to produce convincing speech is not permission to place words in someone's mouth.

The policies also differ in whom they cover:

Issuer and addressees	Rules within the same instrument	Instrument status
Missouri Baptist Convention — staff, contractors, and freelance providers doing MBC work	Limits on substantive religious authorship; visual authenticity; voice consent and approval	Convention policy, revised Jan. 13, 2026[2]
National Ministries UCC — employees; contractor/vendor contracts separate	Approved applications; first-draft supervisor disclosure; meeting consent, correction, and nonofficial notes	Employee handbook policy, Mar. 2026[3]
Archdiocese of Seattle — official parish/school use; separate staff provisions	Tool authorization; sensitive data; review; theological and pastoral non-substitution	Archdiocesan policy, Apr. 2026[7]
Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis — users covered by Policy 201	Work-data restrictions; manager permission for sensitive inputs; factual verification	Policy 201, effective Sept. 8, 2026[8]

VI. Where AI Is Already Visible

Some of the most ordinary church uses of AI are far removed from sermons. The Fountain reports using AI to help write website search descriptions and other metadata, while manually checking pages.[9] The Episcopal Diocese of the Great Lakes says it uses AI to produce image descriptions for accessibility (*alt text*) and that people correct video captions.[10] St. John's Episcopal Church in Mount Pleasant, a parish within that diocesan hierarchy, describes AI-supported scheduling but says its platform-generated captions are **not reviewed**.[11] The two accounts describe different approaches to reviewing routine AI output within the same diocesan hierarchy.

Church chatbots bring the question into more personal territory. Friendship Missionary Baptist Church offers PJGPT ("Pastor Justin GPT"), which its website describes as a digital discipleship assistant for questions about Scripture, prayer, and other concerns. The church says the assistant is not a substitute for a pastor or professional care. In a CNN report aired August 24, 2026, reporter Nick Watt told an AI version of the church's pastor, Justin Lester, that he felt lonely. The assistant responded with scriptural encouragement and urged him to reach out to another person.[13]

On its website, Experience Church offers Ask Theo, a chat assistant for general questions about the church. Its September 2026 terms tell users to confirm important information, including pastoral matters, with the church office.[19]

In an October 2025 FAQ, the Northern Texas–Northern Louisiana Synod described LutherBot as a beta-stage AI assistant for questions about theology, Lutheran beliefs, Scripture, and church life. The FAQ says the assistant is intended to draw from ELCA, synod, and authorized congregational resources and to help with initial questions without replacing pastors or human conversation. An April 2026 synod publication continued to identify LutherBot as a public project.[20]

An answer from a church chatbot is not the same as a conversation with a pastor. That matters when someone comes to a church looking for a person, not only an answer.

VII. When an AI Output Becomes a Church Document

On May 19, 2026, the Virginia Conference UMC released interim guidance on AI use, acknowledging AI assistance with research, language suggestions, and section structure. Its AI Task Force reported that a subgroup and the full task force reviewed the text before release.[14] It remains interim guidance rather than a final enacted policy.

National Ministries UCC draws a boundary at a different stage: meeting records. Its employee handbook says employees **should** use only approved AI meeting assistants, and only after notifying other participants and obtaining their consent. Employees **must not** allow an assistant to attend a meeting in their absence. If the host wishes to share generated notes with attendees, the host or a designee **must** review and correct inaccuracies within **two business days of the meeting date**, before sharing. The notes remain employees' personal notes, not official meeting records; the handbook also instructs employees not to rely on assistants to take minutes for official bodies.[3]

The Virginia Conference published an AI-assisted document but described it as interim guidance. Under National Ministries UCC's handbook, corrected AI meeting notes may be shared but remain employees' personal notes rather than official meeting records. Reviewing a document does not, by itself, make it final policy or an official record.

VIII. What Human Responsibility Means in Practice

The policies examined here do not draw one line between acceptable and unacceptable AI. The Missouri Baptist Convention distinguishes assistance with writing from substantial authorship of religious teaching, and sets separate conditions for using a person's voice. Seattle requires approval for official tool use while keeping spiritual direction and sacramental-preparation decisions with people. National Ministries UCC allows reviewed AI-generated meeting notes to circulate without becoming official minutes.[2] [7] [3]

A church considering a particular use of AI might begin with three questions: **What may the tool do? Who must write, consent, review, or decide? When, if ever, may the result speak or act for the church?** A different task may call for a different answer. The decision must also follow the church's own procedures; another institution's policy is a source of comparison, not automatically its rule.

> **Example: AI meeting notes**
>
> Consider a church discussing AI meeting notes. Before turning on an assistant, leaders can ask: who may authorize its presence, whose consent is needed, who corrects the notes, and whether they can ever become official minutes?
>
> Recording those answers and naming the people responsible gives staff and members a decision they can understand and revisit.

IX. Conclusion

For churches, the difficult questions begin where general permission to use AI ends. Assistance with theological research is not authority to teach. A detector's score is not a judgment on a candidate. A corrected set of meeting notes is not necessarily the church's official record.

The cases are best understood through the responsibilities attached to each task. **The question is not only what AI can produce, but who may speak, judge, care, and act in the church's name—and who remains answerable when AI assists.**

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