

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



# *5 Ways*

## **Artificial Intelligence Can Help Church Leaders**

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Have you been listening to the buzz about artificial intelligence in the broader culture?

**Artificial intelligence used to seem like one of those distant technologies that is always five years down the road; however, it is already creeping into our daily lives.**

Whether it's asking Siri to text your wife or talking to Alexa about the latest score for your favorite team, artificial intelligence has already moved into our everyday world in many different ways.

Artificial intelligence can process copious amounts of data, data sets so large that no human could understand or process them quickly enough for that data to be functional and useful. Still, some folks see artificial intelligence as something to fear (but it isn't) or that this highly technical infrastructure won't ever impact us (but it definitely will).

The reality is that artificial intelligence is never going to replace people. People in professions like yours and mine will always be necessary for creative, emotional work.

Leading experts in artificial intelligence advise that we should think about artificial intelligence the same way we think about any tool. **In the same way that a shovel didn't replace the laborer's need to think about where to use the shovel or how the spreadsheet didn't replace the CFO needing to analyze the finances of an organization, artificial intelligence won't**

**replace the human work necessary to achieve true progress.**

However, it will change the way we do our work. Below are five ways that I can see it impacting our line of work. I'd love to hear what you think! Leave a comment below about how you think artificial intelligence might impact the way we do what we do.

## Processing your email

Remember when email was new and fun?

I still remember those days at my university's computer lab sending emails to my then-girlfriend. It felt like magic that my words somehow traveled all the way from my school to her school in no time at all.

Despite texting, Skyping, and Facetimeing, email continues to be a vitally important communication trend. In fact, no other tool that the internet has brought us is really as effective in reaching people and leveraging change. It will be a long time before email becomes obsolete.

**There will be a day where artificial intelligence will read all our emails for us and compress them down to the two or three messages that really require our attention and action.** In fact, we're already seeing some of this in the way Gmail and other services organize our emails for us by figuring out those that are of vital importance and tagging or filing them in a way that makes it easy for us to process them.

Long-term, we'll continually gain more clarity on which emails we need to process more quickly, and our artificial intelligence bots will let us know immediately if there's something incredibly pressing. We'll keep everything else for the times of day when we have more time to review all our emails.

[Sidebar: You should not be checking your email constantly. Set aside time during the day to sit down and drive your inbox to zero every single time. But that's another blog post.]

## Pastoral chatbots

Okay, go with me on this one. Some people are already talking to Siri in a way they shouldn't (i.e., declaring their love for her. Good thing the folks in Cupertino have programmed her to be shy and push away any potential suitors.) That being said, we've already seen the rise of increasingly intelligent chatbots. Eventually, these may replace some levels of church counseling and pastoral care.



You and I know that part of helping people process their story is asking them questions about what God is doing internally and reflecting on their experiences with Him. This line of questioning could be replaced by chatbots—or at least could help triage incoming conversations on your church's website, app, or audio interface to help direct the person from your church to the right individual.

Examples of some of these personal chatbots include:

- [HelloTars Personal Chatbots](#)
- [Woebot](#)
- [Tess: The Mental Health Chatbot](#)

I could see this kind of technology replacing receptionists with an audio interface for callers that simply re-routes phone calls to the correct person. That audio receptionist AI will need to be intelligent enough to recognize if the person on the other end of the line is in a moment of crisis and send a message to the appropriate person at once.

Now, to understand the difference between a caller who wants to pester the pastor about the color of the carpeting and someone who's in the middle of a crisis requires a fairly high level of sophistication, of course. However, this sort of AI, at its most effective point, could help us provide a higher level of service to our church members.

## Attendance on weekends

Can you imagine being able to send an email, text message, or audio message to everyone who attended your service this weekend? How about being able to reach out to those who didn't attend with a summary of the service and an invitation for next weekend?

There will come a day when you'll be able to receive a report after every service that will tell you who was in the room. I'd love to be able to set a preset that would say, "If these 10 leaders show up today, send me a text message," so I could keep an eye out for them and connect with them in the lobby after the service.

This kind of facial-recognition technology already exists, but to have the ability to take a high-res image, count the number of people in a room, figure out who they are, and generate appropriate action items? Game-changing.

## Finding connections between people

It remains to be seen whether we will continue to live in an open world where there is increasing value in being public with information about who we are and where we spend our time. If that trend continues, you'll have a powerful opportunity to find connections within your church.

Take your church database, for example. Powered by AI, it could provide real-time networking to help your people in the real world. As a church leader, you may meet with someone who needs a job. **You'd consult your church database and have it search the social media feeds of those attending your church to find indications that their employers may be hiring.** Imagine being able to turn that information back around to this individual. What an amazing opportunity that would be!

There are a thousand different ways where helping your church community get more connected to each other would provide both real value to your church and real care to your people. We already do this now, but realistically none of us can remember more than a few hundred contacts. When your church grows beyond that, it can be difficult to keep all the social connections clear.

## Personalizing communications at scale

Artificial intelligence, at its core, will be most useful in helping individuals filter out the noise. **It won't matter if it's email, text, audio message, or a phone call. Unless we produce hyper-personalized messages that are most useful to the individual, people will simply tune us out.**



Using artificial intelligence, churches will be able to develop streams of communication based on an individual's needs, preferences, age, and stage. Imagine your church being able to serve up customized content from messages two years ago that includes a message specifically speaking to a need that someone in your church has expressed online. That day is coming.

Keeping ahead of the personalization game should be an important focus for us if we want to stay relevant and engaged with our communities long-term.

Artificial intelligence is here to stay. While it may not appear like it does in the science fiction movies of our childhood, there will come a day where artificial intelligence will take over so much of our personal interactions. I don't think there's going to be a switch one day all of a sudden; rather, it will be a slow and steady progression of these tools and technologies that enable us to help others in a new way.

## How do you think artificial intelligence might help you at your church?

Leave a comment [here](#) to let us know if you can think of some other ways that artificial intelligence might help you as a leader in the future.

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