

AI Policy for Greater Alton Church

Adopted January 1, 2026 by The Elders of Greater Alton Church

Why This Policy Exists

Artificial intelligence is no longer a future concern for the church - it is a present reality shaping how our people pray, study Scripture, and seek spiritual guidance.

According to Barna's *State of the Church 2026* research, roughly one in three practicing Christians now say spiritual advice from AI is as trustworthy as advice from a pastor. Among Gen Z and Millennials, that number rises to two in five. Four in ten practicing Christians report that AI has already helped them with prayer, Bible study, or spiritual growth. And yet only 5% of churches have an established AI policy, and just 12% of pastors say they feel comfortable teaching their congregations about AI.

This policy exists to close that gap. It is not primarily a technology document - it is a discipleship document. It provides guardrails for how our staff, volunteers, and leadership use AI in ministry while also equipping us to shepherd our congregation through a moment of significant cultural and spiritual change.

Our guiding conviction: AI is a tool, not a teacher. It can assist human effort, but it cannot replace the Holy Spirit's work through embodied, relational, covenantal community.

Scope

This policy applies to:

- All paid staff (full-time and part-time)
 - Volunteer leaders (ministry leads, small group leaders, worship team, tech team, kids/youth workers)
 - Elders, deacons, and board members
 - Any contractor or vendor producing content or handling data on behalf of the church
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Section 1: Theological Foundations

Before addressing practical guidelines, we establish several convictions that undergird this policy.

1.1 The Sufficiency of Scripture. The Bible is God's authoritative Word and the final standard for faith and practice (2 Timothy 3:16–17). AI-generated theological content must always be evaluated against Scripture, not treated as a parallel source of spiritual authority.

1.2 The Irreplaceability of Human Shepherding. God designed the church to be led by Spirit-filled, called, and accountable human leaders (Ephesians 4:11–13; 1 Peter 5:1–4). No AI tool can fulfill the pastoral functions of presence, prayer, confession-hearing, sacrament administration, or covenantal accountability.

1.3 The Value of Authenticity. Our congregation trusts that what is spoken from the pulpit, written in a pastoral letter, or shared in a counseling session comes from a real person who has wrestled with God's Word and applied it through lived experience. This trust is sacred and must be protected.

1.4 Wisdom and Discernment. Technology is not morally neutral in its effects. We are called to "test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and to exercise collective discernment about how new tools shape our formation as followers of Jesus.

Section 2: Approved and Prohibited Uses

2.1 Approved Uses (With Disclosure Requirements Noted)

AI tools may be used to assist with the following tasks, provided the responsible person reviews, edits, and takes ownership of all output:

Administrative & Operational

- Drafting internal emails, meeting agendas, and scheduling communications
- Summarizing meeting notes or generating action items
- Creating first drafts of budgets, project plans, or operational documents
- Translating content for multilingual ministry contexts

Content & Communication

- Brainstorming sermon illustrations, outlines, or research starting points (*see Section 3 for sermon-specific rules*)
- Drafting social media captions, newsletter copy, or website content
- Generating graphic design concepts or slide deck layouts
- Proofreading, grammar-checking, and editing written materials
- Transcribing sermons, meetings, or interviews

Learning & Research

- Exploring commentaries, cross-references, or historical context during personal study
- Summarizing long-form articles or books for staff development
- Comparing Bible translations side by side

2.2 Prohibited Uses

The following uses of AI are not permitted under any circumstances:

Spiritual Care & Counseling

- Using AI to generate pastoral counseling responses, whether for in-person, phone, email, or text-based care
- Deploying AI chatbots as substitutes for human pastoral interaction (e.g., "Ask our AI pastor")
- Using AI to write personalized prayers for specific congregants without the author personally praying through and revising the content

Congregant Data

- Entering any personally identifiable information about congregants into public AI tools (names, prayer requests, giving records, counseling notes, attendance data, contact information)
- Using AI tools to profile, score, or segment congregants for any purpose beyond anonymized aggregate analysis
- Feeding membership databases, small group rosters, or directory information into AI platforms

Representation & Authority

- Presenting AI-generated content as though it were a personal testimony, lived experience, or firsthand account
- Using AI to generate "prophetic words," tongues interpretations, or claims of divine revelation
- Creating deepfakes, AI-generated voice clones, or synthetic media of any church leader or congregant

Financial & Legal

- Using AI to make financial decisions, approve expenditures, or generate legal documents without qualified human review
- Allowing AI tools to access church banking, payroll, or financial systems

2.3 Gray Areas — Requires Leadership Approval

Some uses require advance conversation with your direct supervisor or the designated AI policy point person before proceeding:

- Using AI to help write or significantly restructure sermon manuscripts (see Section 3)
 - Integrating AI-powered tools into any congregant-facing system (e.g., website chatbots, automated follow-up sequences, AI-enhanced giving platforms)
 - Purchasing or subscribing to new AI tools on behalf of the church
 - Using AI-generated images or video in worship services or public communications
 - Any experimental or pilot use not covered above
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Section 3: Sermon & Teaching Preparation

Because preaching and teaching carry unique spiritual weight and congregational trust, they receive specific treatment here.

3.1 What Is Permitted

- Using AI as a **research assistant**: generating background on biblical languages, historical context, cross-references, or theological positions you then verify independently.
- Using AI to **brainstorm** sermon structures, illustration angles, or application points — treating output the same way you'd treat a conversation with a colleague.
- Using AI to **edit or proofread** a manuscript you have already written.
- Using AI to **transcribe** your spoken draft into written form.

3.2 What Is Not Permitted

- Submitting a passage or topic to AI and delivering the resulting output as your sermon without substantial personal study, rewriting, and spiritual preparation.
- Using AI to generate the core theological argument or application of a message without doing your own exegetical work first.
- Copy-pasting AI-generated illustrations or stories and presenting them as personal experiences.

3.3 The Integrity Test

Before delivering any message where AI played a role in preparation, the preacher or teacher should be able to honestly affirm:

1. I have personally studied the biblical text and can defend my interpretation apart from what AI suggested.
2. The theological convictions expressed are mine, not simply what a model generated.
3. Every illustration or story presented as personal experience actually happened to me or is clearly attributed.
4. I could have written this message without AI - the tool accelerated my process, but it did not replace my process.

Section 4: Data Privacy & Security

4.1 General Principles

- Church data belongs to the church and, by extension, to the people who entrusted it to us. It must be handled with the same care as a confidential pastoral conversation.
- No congregant data should ever be entered into a public or consumer AI tool (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot) unless the church has a signed data processing agreement with the provider and the tool is accessed through an enterprise or organizational account with appropriate privacy protections.
- Staff and volunteers must assume that anything typed into a public AI tool may be used to train future models and could theoretically surface in another user's session.

4.2 Approved Tools & Accounts

The church will maintain a list of approved AI tools and accounts. This list will be reviewed quarterly by [designated person/team]. Only approved tools may be used for church-related work.

Tool	Approved Use	Account Type	Data Restrictions

4.3 Incident Response

If a staff member or volunteer believes they have inadvertently entered sensitive congregant data into an AI tool:

1. Immediately notify [designated person/role].
2. Document what data was entered, into which tool, and when.
3. [Designated person] will assess the risk, notify affected individuals if warranted, and determine whether the incident requires disclosure under applicable privacy laws.

Section 5: Disclosure & Transparency

5.1 When Disclosure Is Required

- **Sermons and Teaching:** If AI played a significant role in generating content (beyond grammar-checking or transcription), the teacher should disclose this to the team. Public disclosure to the congregation is encouraged but left to pastoral discretion.
- **Congregant-Facing Communications:** Any AI-generated content sent to the congregation (newsletters, emails, social posts) should be reviewed and approved by a human.
- **Counseling & Pastoral Care:** If a staff member uses AI to research a counseling topic, that is acceptable. If AI generates language that is used in a pastoral care context, that must be disclosed to the recipient.

5.2 When Disclosure Is Not Required

- Using AI for internal administrative tasks (scheduling, note summaries, draft agendas)
- Grammar and spell-checking
- Personal study and research that informs but does not directly produce congregant-facing content

Section 6: Spiritual Formation & Congregational Discipleship

This section addresses the broader concern that AI is increasingly shaping the spiritual lives of the people in our pews - often without pastoral input.

6.1 The Discipleship Opportunity

Barna's research reveals that one-third of practicing Christians want guidance from their pastor on how to navigate AI, yet few pastors feel equipped to provide it. This policy commits our church to actively discipling our congregation on faithful AI use, not merely regulating staff behavior.

6.2 What We Will Teach

Our church commits to regularly addressing the following themes with our congregation through sermons, classes, small groups, or other appropriate channels:

- **AI is not a shepherd.** It cannot know you, love you, pray for you, weep with you, or hold you accountable. It generates plausible text - it does not possess wisdom, discernment, or the Holy Spirit.
- **AI reflects its training data, not God's heart.** AI models are trained on the internet's content, which includes heresy, distortion, and error alongside truth. Every AI-generated theological claim must be tested against Scripture and the wisdom of the historic church.
- **Convenience is not the same as formation.** Spiritual growth often requires the slow, inefficient, relational work of community - not optimized answers delivered in seconds. Choosing the harder path of in-person conversation, communal worship, and accountable relationships is a form of faithfulness.
- **Your data is sacred.** Encouraging congregants to be cautious about sharing personal prayer requests, struggles, or spiritual questions with AI tools that store and process that data.
- **AI can be a useful servant.** When kept in its proper place, AI can help with Bible reading plans, language study, scheduling devotional time, and exploring questions. The key is that it serves your spiritual life - it does not direct it.

6.3 Practical Congregational Guidance

We recommend sharing the following principles with congregants:

1. **Never let AI be your only voice.** If you ask AI a spiritual question, bring the answer to a pastor, mentor, or small group for evaluation.
2. **Protect your inner life.** Be cautious about sharing deeply personal spiritual struggles with AI tools. Confession and vulnerability belong in trusted human relationships.
3. **Watch for the substitution effect.** If you notice you're turning to AI instead of opening your Bible, praying, or calling a friend - that's a warning sign worth paying attention to.
4. **Stay in community.** The antidote to AI-mediated spirituality is embodied community. Prioritize being physically present with other believers.

Section 7: Review & Revision

This policy will be reviewed at least annually by [designated person/team] and updated as needed. AI technology is evolving rapidly, and this policy must evolve with it. Significant revisions require approval from [governing body].

The next scheduled review date is: **[Date]**

This policy was developed with reference to Barna Group's State of the Church 2026 research (in partnership with Gloo) and Technology for Missional Impact: State of Church Tech 2026 (in partnership with Pushpay). Churches are encouraged to adapt this document to their specific theological tradition, governance structure, and ministry context.