

Becoming a Wise Pastoral Companion in the Age of AI

A three-part workshop for ministers

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Workshop: Becoming a Wise Pastoral Companion in the Age of AI

Purpose: Equip ministers to recognize their own assumptions about AI, develop healthy ministry practices, and accompany others through AI-related pastoral situations with curiosity, theological reflection, and compassion.



Wise pastoral leadership joins careful discernment with the courage to act.

Part 1 – Knowing Yourself

“What Do I Bring into the Room?”

50 minutes

Goal

Increase participants’ awareness of their own experiences, emotions, assumptions, hopes, fears, and patterns of AI use.

Participants will consider how their personal posture toward AI may shape both their ministerial practices and the care they offer to others.

Core Principle

Every pastoral encounter begins with what the caregiver brings into the room.

An unexamined posture toward AI can be projected onto the person seeking care, even when the minister intends to remain neutral. Self-location is not about eliminating emotion or reaching the “correct” opinion. It is about recognizing what belongs to the situation and what the caregiver may be carrying into it.

1. Framing the Conversation

5 minutes

Facilitator Introduction

Say:

Before we consider how ministers should use AI or how we might accompany someone through an AI-related concern, we need to locate ourselves.

Each of us comes with a personal history: experiences of technology, hopes for ministry, fears of being replaced, concerns about authenticity, and assumptions about what AI will do to the church. None of these automatically disqualifies us from faithful ministry. But when they remain unexamined, they can quietly direct how we respond.

Emphasize:

- This is not an assessment of whether participants are sufficiently enthusiastic or cautious.
- Participants should approach themselves with the same patience and curiosity they would offer someone seeking care.
- No one will be required to disclose personal information they would prefer to keep private.

Introduce the guiding question:

What am I bringing into the room when AI becomes part of the conversation?

2. Self-Location and Reflection

10 minutes

Purpose

Help participants notice their immediate emotional, embodied, and behavioral reactions before analyzing or judging AI.

Facilitator Instructions

Direct participants to the [Self-Location and Reflection for Care Providers](#) tool.

Explain:

This tool is designed as a pause before offering care. It helps us recognize which parts of our response arise from the situation in front of us and which parts may come from our own biography, fears, habits, or experiences.

Invite participants to begin by identifying one feeling that arises when they think about AI and ministry.

Possible feelings include:

- Curiosity
- Excitement
- Relief
- Anxiety
- Irritation
- Grief
- Contempt
- Fascination
- Inevitability
- Fear of being left behind
- Concern about losing expertise or authority

Ask participants to work privately through the tool's four lenses:

- Biology: What is happening in my body?
- Biography: Where might I have learned or developed this response?
- Behavior: What do I tend to do when I feel this way?
- Backstory: What meaning or story am I attaching to this reaction?

The tool presents these as a grounding pause rather than an intellectual analysis. Participants do not need to resolve the feeling; they only need to notice it.

Facilitator Transition

After several minutes, say:

Self-awareness does not require us to stop having reactions. It gives us enough space to choose a pastoral response rather than being governed by a reflex.

Invite one slow breath in and one breath out.

Offer the closing line from the tool:

“I do not have to have a judgment or rightness around this technology. I only have to be present to this person.”

3. AI Autobiography

10 minutes

Purpose

Help participants identify the experiences and stories that have shaped their current posture toward AI.

Facilitator Instructions

Invite participants to reflect individually and write brief responses. They do not need to answer every prompt.

Suggested prompts:

- When did I first become aware of generative AI?
- What was my initial response?
- What positive experience has most influenced my view of AI?
- What troubling or disappointing experience has influenced me?
- Where does AI currently appear in my ministry or daily life?
- What do I hope AI might make possible?
- What do I fear it might diminish, distort, or replace?
- How does AI affect my understanding of my identity or value as a minister?
- Where do I feel confident, and where do I feel left behind?

Conclude with:

The story I currently tell myself about AI and ministry is...

Remind participants that an autobiography is not a verdict. Their story may continue to change as their experience and understanding develop.

4. Small-Group Conversation

10 minutes

Purpose

Help participants hear the diversity of experience within the room without debating whose perspective is correct.

Facilitator Instructions

Place participants in groups of three.

Invite each person to share only what they are comfortable sharing:

- One experience that has shaped their attitude toward AI
- One hope they carry
- One concern they carry
- One thing they noticed about their own reaction or pattern

Ask participants to practice:

- Listening to understand rather than persuade
- Asking curious questions
- Resisting the urge to correct, reassure, or solve
- Allowing different experiences to coexist

Possible follow-up questions include:

- What makes that hope important to you?
- What do you fear could be lost?
- Where do you think that reaction comes from?
- How might this experience affect your ministry?

Facilitator Note

Do not ask groups to reach consensus. The purpose is to experience how easily people of good faith can approach AI from different histories, emotions, and vocational concerns.

5. AI Values Spectrum

This exercise can be done as a self-reflection or as a large group conversation, depending on the availability of time and comfort level of those in the room.

10 minutes

Purpose

Make visible the variety of convictions in the room and allow participants to notice how they respond when others take a different position.

Facilitator Instructions

Designate one side of the room as Strongly Agree and the opposite side as Strongly Disagree, with a continuum between them.

Read one statement at a time and invite participants to stand where their response falls on the spectrum.

Suggested statements:

- AI will become an essential tool for ministry.
- Using AI can create more time for human connection.
- AI threatens something important about pastoral identity.
- Ministers have a responsibility to learn how AI works.
- AI can support spiritual and theological reflection.
- The church should move cautiously even when AI is useful.
- I am more concerned about overusing AI than rejecting it too quickly.
- I feel prepared to accompany someone whose relationship with AI is very different from mine.

Choose four to six statements, depending on time.

After each statement:

1. Invite participants to notice their immediate reaction.
2. Ask them to speak briefly with someone standing near them.
3. Invite one or two people from different places on the spectrum to explain what shaped their response.

Ask:

- What value is beneath your position?
- What experience led you to stand there?
- What do you hear from someone standing elsewhere?
- Did you feel tempted to defend, correct, withdraw, or persuade?

Participants may change positions as they listen.

Facilitator Note

Keep the focus on self-awareness rather than debate. The important discovery is not only where participants stand, but what happens within them when someone stands somewhere else.

6. Closing Reflection

5 minutes

Invite participants to reflect silently or discuss briefly:

- What emotion, story, or assumption do I now recognize more clearly?
- Where might excitement, anxiety, or defensiveness influence my ministry?
- When I feel unsettled by someone's AI experience, what is my usual reflex?
- What practice will help me pause and become present before responding?
- What do I need to remember when another person's experience of AI is not my own?

Close with:

Self-location is not self-absorption. It is preparation for presence. When we know what we are carrying, we are less likely to place it onto someone else.

We do not need to become neutral, emotionless, or certain. We need enough awareness to remain curious, grounded, and attentive to the person before us.

Outcome

Participants recognize the experiences, emotions, assumptions, and behavioral patterns they bring to AI-related conversations. They leave with a practical self-location process that can help them pause before making decisions about their own ministry practice or offering pastoral care to others.

Part 2 – Healthy Practices and Boundaries

“How Do I Use AI Faithfully?”

60 minutes

Goal

Help participants develop intentional habits and boundaries for ministerial AI use.

This section does not establish universal rules for every minister or every ministry context. It invites participants to discern whether AI belongs in this particular task, in this particular situation, and what cautions or responsibilities accompany its use.

Key Areas of Discernment

- Transparency
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Intellectual honesty
- Spiritual authenticity
- Dependence versus assistance
- Human responsibility

1. Framing the Conversation

5 minutes

Introduce the section with language such as:

AI can assist with many parts of ministry, but usefulness is not the only question. We must also ask what is faithful, what is responsible, and what work should remain deeply human. The goal is not to create one boundary for everyone, but to become more intentional about the boundaries each of us needs.

Remind participants that boundaries may differ according to context, role, congregation, and the sensitivity of the information involved.

Introduce one important distinction:

In this section, we are considering the minister’s own use of AI. We are not yet assessing a congregant’s relationship with AI or responding to someone in distress. Our question here is narrower: Should I use AI for this ministry task?

2. Primer: The Discipline of Ordination

10 minutes

Facilitator Primer

Each of us has parts of our vocation that we hold as sacred. This is not an exercise in judging one another or comparing our boundaries against someone else's. Identifying what we hold sacred is important because those convictions shape the boundaries that guide our practice.

Instead of thinking about AI only in terms of yes or no, imagine a continuum. Which situations require your presence, judgment, prayer, and voice? Which tasks may be delegated or enhanced by a tool? Which tasks contain labor that is itself formational?

A useful question is: If AI did this part, what would not happen in me?

Another question is: What belongs to my unclonable core—the work I will not delegate because it is where my vocation lives?

The language of the “unclonable core” comes directly from the decision-tree resource. Beyond the firm boundaries of confidentiality and truthfulness, it invites each minister to identify work they will not delegate because the work itself forms and expresses their vocation.

Name the Enhancement

Before introducing the tree, invite participants to complete:

Using AI for _____ frees me for _____.

Explain:

The first blank names the task. The second names the ministry benefit. If we cannot say what the saved time is for—presence, study, prayer, rest, family, community, or another part of our calling—it is worth asking whether anything is truly being enhanced.

Facilitator Transition

As we consider specific uses of AI, keep asking: Is AI supporting my ministry, or is it beginning to replace work that I am called to hold?

3. Boundary Exercise: “What Line Would I Not Cross?”

15 minutes

Introduce the Decision Tree

Display the first page of “Should I Use AI for This?”.

Say:

This tool does not answer whether AI belongs in ministry in general. It helps us discern whether AI belongs in one particular task. We begin by naming the task in one sentence and then carry it through five gates.

Briefly introduce the five gates:

1. Confidence: Does this involve someone's private story?
2. Formation: Is the labor itself part of the ministry?
3. Relationship: Will the recipient assume this came personally from me?

4. Truth: Can I verify everything that will travel to others?

5. To What End?: What is this use forming in me, the congregation, and our relationships?

Explain the three possible outcomes:

- Augment freely
- Proceed with named cautions
- Do not delegate

The order matters: confidentiality comes before convenience, and formation comes before efficiency.

Instructions

Place participants in groups of three or four.

For each task, ask them first to choose:

- I would use AI for this.
- I might use AI with clear boundaries.
- I would not use AI for this.

Then ask them to identify:

Which gate most influenced your answer?

Possible tasks:

- Preparing an initial sermon outline
- Writing the sermon manuscript
- Drafting a response to a pastoral email
- Summarizing counseling or pastoral-care notes
- Producing a first draft of a Bible study
- Researching historical background for a biblical text
- Preparing for spiritual direction
- Formatting a worship bulletin
- Drafting a congregational newsletter
- Making a decision about a staff member or congregation member
- Communicating directly with congregation members through an automated system

For two or three selected tasks, ask groups to discuss:

- What benefit could AI provide?
- Which gate raises a caution?
- What boundary or mitigation would be needed?

- Who could be harmed if that boundary failed?
- Would this be augmentation, cautious use, or delegation?

Facilitator Note

Do not seek universal agreement. Listen for the values underneath participants' answers:

- Trust
- Honesty
- Efficiency
- Privacy
- Authenticity
- Formation
- Care
- Accountability
- Responsibility

However, make clear that some boundaries are firmer than personal preference. The decision tree treats identifiable pastoral confidences as a hard stop and requires ministers to verify factual, scriptural, historical, and theological claims before they travel to others.

4. Case Study Discernment: AI and Sermon Preparation

15 minutes

For a fuller version of this scenario, use [Case 11: Whose Sermon Is It?](#), then browse additional formation cases under [Clergy Use of AI](#).

Display the decision tree again and provide the case:

A pastor began using AI for sermon preparation—first for brainstorming and illustrations, then increasingly for theological framing, structure, and final wording. The sermons remained coherent and pastorally warm, but the pastor noticed a subtle loss of engagement with the biblical text, the congregation's lived reality, and their own theological wrestling.

The primary danger was not plagiarism but formation: preaching muscles were weakening through underuse. Over time, the congregation could receive sermons that were polished but less incarnational, less contextual, and less connected to the pastor's prayerful encounter with Scripture.

Step 1: Name the Task

Ask groups to write the task in one sentence.

For example:

Should this pastor use AI to develop the theological structure and final wording of the weekly sermon?

Avoid carrying a vague question such as "Should pastors use AI?" through the tree. The tool works one task at a time.

Step 2: Walk Through the Five Gates

Ask each group to discuss:

Gate 1: Confidence

- Does this task involve private or identifiable congregational stories?
- Is the pastor entering details about particular people or pastoral situations?

The sermon task itself may pass this gate, but any identifiable pastoral information must remain outside the AI system.

Gate 2: Formation

- Is wrestling with Scripture part of what forms the preacher?
- What is no longer happening in the pastor when AI supplies the theological frame and final language?
- Could AI serve as a conversation partner without becoming the ghostwriter?

This is the central gate in the case.

Gate 3: Relationship

- Will the congregation assume the sermon reflects the pastor's own prayer, study, theological judgment, and voice?
- Would the congregation feel cared for or deceived if they knew how the sermon was made?
- Is disclosure needed, or has too much been delegated?

Gate 4: Truth

- Can the pastor verify every biblical, historical, theological, and factual claim?
- Does the pastor have enough time and knowledge to check the material?
- Would verification take longer than doing the research directly?

Gate 5: To What End?

- What pattern is this use creating in the pastor?
- Is it freeing the pastor for deeper care, prayer, and study?
- Or is it weakening theological judgment, contextual attention, and the pastor's own voice?
- What is this practice making of the pastor over time?

Step 3: Determine the Outcome

Ask each group to select:

- Augment freely
- Proceed with named cautions
- Do not delegate

Then ask them to complete:

AI may appropriately assist with _____, but the pastor should continue to hold _____.

The worked examples in the attached resource distinguish between outlining a sermon, which may proceed with caution when AI serves as a conversation partner, and writing the sermon itself, which it identifies as work that should not be delegated. The recommended boundary is to augment the study around the sermon while preserving the preacher's own wrestling and writing.

Facilitator Debrief

Invite each group to share:

1. Which gate carried the most weight?
2. What boundary did the group establish?
3. What could AI appropriately contribute?
4. What work must remain with the preacher?

Record the emerging principles where everyone can see them.

Possible themes:

- Protect confidential information.
- Keep the theological wrestling.
- Do not delegate pastoral judgment.
- Use AI as a conversation partner, not a ghostwriter.
- Verify every factual, biblical, and theological claim.
- Be honest about authorship and contribution.
- Retain responsibility for the final work.
- Keep the congregation's context and lived reality central.
- Use AI to support formation, not bypass it.
- Ask what the practice is forming over time.

Facilitator Summary

The decision tree does not merely ask whether the finished sermon sounds good. It asks what was protected or displaced in making it. A polished product is not the only measure of faithful ministry. The process also forms the preacher.

5. Personal AI Covenant

10 minutes

Explain that the covenant is private. Participants will not be required to share it publicly.

Invite each person to complete the following statements:

My Personal AI Covenant

Enhancement

Using AI for _____ will free me for _____.

Confidence

I will protect private, sensitive, or privileged information by:

Formation

The work I need to continue doing myself because it forms me is:

Relationship

When others reasonably assume that words or work came personally from me, I will:

Truth

I will verify AI-generated facts, citations, biblical interpretations, and theological claims by:

Responsibility

When AI contributes to my work, I will remain responsible for:

My Unclonable Core

I will not delegate:

One Boundary to Strengthen:

Closing Reflection for Part 2

5 minutes

Invite participants to reflect silently or discuss briefly:

- Where could AI appropriately support my ministry, and what would it free me for?
- Does this task involve a confidence or private story that must remain outside an AI system?
- If AI did this part of the work, what would not happen in me?
- If others knew how this was made, would they feel cared for or deceived—and am I prepared to verify and take responsibility for it?
- Taken together, is my use of AI drawing me and my congregation toward love, community, vocation, and God—or toward dependency, diminishment, and disconnection?

Close with:

Faithful AI use is not simply about what a tool is capable of doing. It is about what we are called to hold, protect, verify, and remain responsible for. Healthy boundaries allow AI to assist ministry without allowing it to displace the work through which ministers are formed and through which people experience genuine pastoral care.

Outcome

Participants leave able to use the “Should I Use AI for This?” decision tree with a specific ministry task. They also leave with intentional rather than reactive practices, named cautions for AI-assisted work, and a personal understanding of what belongs within their unclonable vocational core.

Part 3 – Pastoral Discernment

“How Do We Keep the Noise from Disconnecting Us from Pastoral Ministry?”

60 minutes

Goal

Help participants remain grounded in their pastoral identity when accompanying people whose experiences with AI are unfamiliar, troubling, or different from their own.

Participants will practice using the Triage Decision Tree to listen for the human and spiritual realities beneath the technology, identify the pastoral posture a situation requires, and discern an appropriate next step.

Core Principle

Pastors care for people—not technologies.

The minister does not need to understand every platform, application, or technical development before offering faithful care. The pastoral task is to listen, accompany, protect dignity, preserve agency, attend to safety, and refer when appropriate.

The Triage Decision Tree is a map rather than a script. Its levels describe the kind of pastoral engagement a situation requires; they are not labels to assign to people.

1. Re-centering the Pastoral Task

10 minutes

Purpose

Help participants distinguish between the noise surrounding AI and the enduring work of pastoral ministry.

Facilitator Introduction

Say:

AI brings a great deal of noise: unfamiliar tools, strong opinions, alarming stories, promises of transformation, and fears about what may be lost. When someone brings an AI-related concern to us, we may feel pressure to understand the technology, judge the person's choices, or solve the problem immediately.

Our task is not to become experts in every technology. Our task is to remain connected to our fundamental purpose as ministers.

Invite participants to reflect silently for two minutes:

When the tools, language, and circumstances change, what remains at the heart of my pastoral calling?

Ask participants to write three words or short phrases describing the work they are called to hold.

Possible responses include:

- Listening
- Proclaiming grace
- Accompanying
- Teaching
- Praying
- Bearing witness
- Protecting dignity
- Building community
- Helping people discern
- Speaking truth
- Holding grief
- Offering hope

Small-Group Conversation

In groups of three, invite participants to share:

- One aspect of pastoral ministry they do not want the noise around AI to obscure
- One way anxiety or excitement about AI could pull them away from that purpose
- One practice that helps them return to their pastoral center

Facilitator Debrief

Invite several responses and summarize:

The circumstances of ministry continually change. Pastoral vocation remains rooted in presence, relationship, discernment, truthfulness, compassion, and the proclamation of grace. The technology may be unfamiliar, but the human longings beneath it are not.

2. Formation in a Changed Landscape

10 minutes

Guiding Question

Do I need to re-engage how I do formation work with my people now that there is a new landscape of available resources?

Purpose

Help participants recognize that people are already being spiritually, morally, and relationally formed by AI systems, whether or not the church has chosen to engage those systems.

Facilitator Instructions

Draw two columns on a board or provide them on a worksheet.

Label the first:

Where people have traditionally looked for guidance

Label the second:

Where people may look for guidance now

Invite participants to offer examples.

The first column might include:

- Scripture
- Prayer
- Pastors
- Parents
- Teachers
- Friends
- Congregations
- Books
- Spiritual directors
- Community traditions

The second might include:

- Search engines
- Social media
- Podcasts
- Online influencers
- AI chatbots
- AI companions
- Personalized spiritual applications
- Algorithmically recommended content

Ask:

- What has changed about how people seek answers?
- What has changed about whom or what people trust?
- What forms of guidance are always available, personalized, and affirming?

- What does the church now need to teach about discernment, authority, truth, and community?
- How might Christian formation need to become more relational, participatory, and transparent?

Facilitator Emphasis

Do not allow this conversation to become a lament about declining pastoral authority.

Say:

The question is not how the church can regain control over every source people consult. The question is how we help people develop the spiritual maturity to discern what they encounter.

Formation in this landscape may include helping people ask:

- Who or what is shaping this answer?
- What understanding of God and humanity is being presented?
- Whose voice is missing?
- Does this guidance deepen love of God and neighbor?
- Does it strengthen agency, honesty, compassion, and connection?
- Does it invite communal discernment or isolate the person from it?
- What other voices, relationships, or traditions should be part of this conversation?

3. Introducing the Triage Decision Tree

10 minutes

Purpose

Give participants a practical framework for responding when a parishioner presents an AI-related experience, attachment, concern, or harm.

Facilitator Introduction

Display the Triage Decision Tree and say:

This tool does not ask us to determine whether AI is good or bad. It helps us ask a more pastoral question: What does this person need from me in this moment?

The tree is a map, not a script. Real conversations may move backward and forward. A safety concern can emerge at any point. The colors describe the posture needed from the caregiver; they are not diagnoses or labels that we place on people.

Step 1: Caregiver Self-Location

Begin at the top of the tree.

Ask:

- What reaction is this situation producing in me?
- Am I frightened, fascinated, skeptical, angry, or eager to correct?

- Am I trying to solve the technology before hearing the person?
- Is something in this situation activating my own experience?

Say:

Self-location does not eliminate our reactions. It helps keep them from directing the care.

Step 2: Identify the Kind of Case

Determine whether the situation is primarily:

- Individual care: A person is experiencing distress, grief, attachment, isolation, loss of agency, exploitation, or harm.
- A policy or system question: The issue concerns ministry practice, policy, privacy, theology, liturgy, disclosure, or congregational responsibility.
- Both: A person is in distress and a policy or system issue is also present.

When both routes are present, receive and stabilize the person first. Address the policy or institutional question separately so that the person's pain is not reduced to a policy problem.

Step 3: Immediate Safety Check

Before doing anything else, ask whether there is acute danger involving:

- Self-harm or harm to others
- Exploitation, coercion, extortion, or fraud
- Severe neglect of eating, sleeping, hygiene, or dependents
- Immediate safeguarding or legal concerns
- Severe inability to function

If acute danger is present, move to the Red Level and take direct protective action. A concern that appears later in the conversation can also move the situation to Red.

Step 4: Unpack the Human Layer

Before choosing a pastoral posture, ask:

- What is the person experiencing?
- What human or spiritual need may be present?
- What is the AI providing?
- What might it be displacing?
- What is happening to the person's agency, relationships, discernment, and ability to function?

Step 5: Identify the Pastoral Level and Posture

Green: Generative and Nourishing Use

The person maintains clear boundaries, understands the tool as software, evaluates its output critically, and experiences positive fruit in other areas of life and faith.

Pastoral posture: Collaborative and affirming presence.

“How is this practice helping you love God and your neighbor more fully in other areas of your life and faith?”

The minister does not need to treat every healthy use as a problem waiting to happen.

Yellow: Subtle Displacement and Over-Reliance

The technology is beginning to replace reflection, prayerful silence, personal voice, or ordinary relational effort.

Pastoral posture: Reflectively curious presence.

“When you turn to the tool for this, whose wisdom or human voice might be missing from the answer?”

The response may involve one small, self-chosen experiment that restores reflection, relationship, or personal voice.

Amber: Agency Erosion and Epistemic Isolation

The person is surrendering significant decisions, moral authority, relationships, or their understanding of reality to the AI system.

Pastoral posture: Agency-inviting and reality-anchoring presence.

“When the system tells you this, where do you experience your own freedom, values, and authority in making the decision?”

The first step is generally relational rather than technological. Add trustworthy human presence before attempting to remove the technology.

Red: Acute Danger and Harm

There is immediate danger involving safety, exploitation, severe functional decline, or basic well-being.

Pastoral posture: Direct protective action.

“Because I care deeply about your safety, I am not going to leave you alone with this right now. Let us pause and contact appropriate support together.”

Green, Yellow, and Amber are practiced through Hearing, Helping, and Healing: sacred listening, one concrete next step that preserves agency, and continuing accompaniment. Red uses the ALGEE first-response framework: assess for danger, listen nonjudgmentally, give reassurance and information, encourage professional help, and encourage other supports. This framework does not replace Mental Health First Aid training or local safeguarding and emergency procedures. (These and other Pastoral Care Models can be found on this site.)

Quick Demonstration: One Practice, Different Pastoral Postures

Offer this brief example:

A parishioner uses an AI prayer companion each morning.

Then add one detail at a time:

- It helps her journal, return to Scripture, and participate more fully in worship.
Possible posture: Green
- She begins using it instead of writing her own prayers or talking with trusted people.
Possible posture: Yellow

- She treats its answers as direct commands from God and makes major decisions solely because the chatbot told her to.
Possible posture: Amber
- The chatbot encourages self-harm, or she stops eating and sleeping because she is interacting with it around the clock.
Posture: Red

Conclude:

The technology has not necessarily changed. What has changed is its place in the person's life and the kind of pastoral engagement the situation requires.

4. Small-Group Case Practice

20 minutes

Divide participants into groups of four or five. Assign each group one case.

Say:

Your task is not to decide whether the person's use of AI is acceptable. Use the Triage Decision Tree to determine what kind of pastoral engagement is needed and how you might accompany the person.

Locate the [Pastoral Care Cases](#) page.

Group Process

Ask each group to work through the following:

1. Self-Locate

- What reaction might this case produce in the minister?
- How could that reaction interfere with care?

2. Identify the Route

- Is this primarily individual care, a policy or system question, or both?

3. Check for Immediate Safety

- Is there acute danger, exploitation, severe distress, or loss of basic functioning?
- What additional information would the minister need to ask about?

4. Unpack the Human Layer

- What is the person experiencing?
- What longing or need may be present?
- What is the AI providing?
- What might it be displacing or weakening?

5. Identify the Pastoral Level and Posture

- Which level best describes the situation at this moment?

- What details support that discernment?
- What pastoral posture does the tree recommend?

6. Name the First Response and Next Step

Prepare:

- Two or three sentences the pastor might say first
- One question the pastor might ask
- One concrete next step
- Any consultation or referral that may be needed

Guidance for the First Response

Encourage responses that:

- Reduce shame
- Communicate curiosity
- Honor the person's experience
- Avoid debating the AI
- Avoid validating every claim
- Avoid dismissing the relationship or experience
- Preserve agency
- Open space for continued accompaniment

A useful opening is:

"It sounds as though this has become very important to you. Help me understand what these conversations provide that has been difficult to find elsewhere."

For Yellow or Amber situations, another helpful question may be:

"Who else might you want beside you as you think about this?"

5. Large-Group Debrief

7 minutes

Invite each group to share:

- The pastoral level and posture they identified
- The human longing or need they heard beneath the technology
- One response the minister should avoid
- One compassionate opening question
- One concrete next step or referral consideration

As groups report, listen for common themes:

- Loneliness
- Grief
- Shame
- Desire for certainty
- Fear of rejection
- Longing to be heard
- Need for forgiveness
- Search for spiritual authority
- Loss of agency
- Withdrawal from community

Facilitator Emphasis

Say:

AI may be providing something real: comfort, attention, affirmation, companionship, language, or a sense of meaning. Naming what it provides does not require us to ignore what it may be displacing.

Our task is to hold both realities. We ask what need is being met, what vulnerability may be developing, and how the person can be accompanied toward greater agency, relationship, truthfulness, safety, and community.

Reinforce several principles from the tree:

- Do not debate the technology before hearing the person.
- Do not treat every AI relationship as a crisis.
- Add human presence before simply subtracting technology.
- Preserve the person's agency whenever safety permits.
- When acute danger appears, move into direct protective action.
- Referral does not end pastoral accompaniment.
- When individual pain and policy questions coexist, care for the person first.

6. Closing Reflection

3 minutes

Invite participants to reflect silently:

- Which case or pastoral level produced the strongest reaction in me?
- Which pastoral posture would be most difficult for me to embody?
- Where might I be tempted to correct, debate, or withdraw instead of listening?

- Who is my consultation route when a situation exceeds my competence?
- What practice helps return me to myself after carrying difficult pastoral encounters?

Close with:

We do not need to understand every technology before we can care for the people using it. We begin where pastoral ministry has always begun: with attention, compassion, truthfulness, discernment, and trust in the presence of God.

The tools may be new. The human longings beneath them are not.

Outcome

Participants leave able to use the Triage Decision Tree to:

- Recognize whether a situation involves individual care, a policy or system issue, or both
- Attend first to immediate safety
- Discern an appropriate pastoral level and posture
- Respond without shame, dismissal, or unnecessary technological debate
- Preserve agency and strengthen human connection
- Identify a concrete next step, consultation, or referral
- Remain grounded in pastoral identity rather than being governed by personal enthusiasm, fear, or opinions about AI

Closing (10 minutes)

Invite participants to reflect:

What surprised me?

What challenged me?

What questions remain?

What is one practice I want to adopt?

What is one boundary I want to establish?

Learning Objectives

By the end of the workshop participants will:

- Recognize their own assumptions, hopes, and concerns regarding AI.
- Develop thoughtful and transparent practices for AI use in ministry.
- Reflect on appropriate personal and professional boundaries.
- Practice accompanying people experiencing AI-related pastoral concerns with curiosity and compassion.
- Use theological reflection to discern faithful responses rather than relying on fear or enthusiasm.
- Identify situations that call for collaboration with mental health, legal, or other professionals.

A Framework That Might Tie the Workshop Together

One way to give the workshop a memorable shape is to organize it around three questions:

1. What is happening in me? (*Self-awareness*)
2. What is happening in my ministry? (*Practices and boundaries*)
3. What is happening in the other person? (*Pastoral accompaniment*)

This progression mirrors a healthy pastoral process. Ministers first attend to their own formation, then examine their own practices, and only then turn outward to accompany others. It also echoes the rhythm of pastoral ministry itself: self-reflection, faithful action, and compassionate presence. That sequence keeps the focus on discernment rather than prescribing universal rules, which seems especially well suited to the emerging and rapidly changing landscape of AI in ministry.