

AI Pastoral Toolkit: The Four Pastoral Levels

Framework, decision tree, and supporting resources · AI Pastoral Toolkit Design Sprint · July 2026

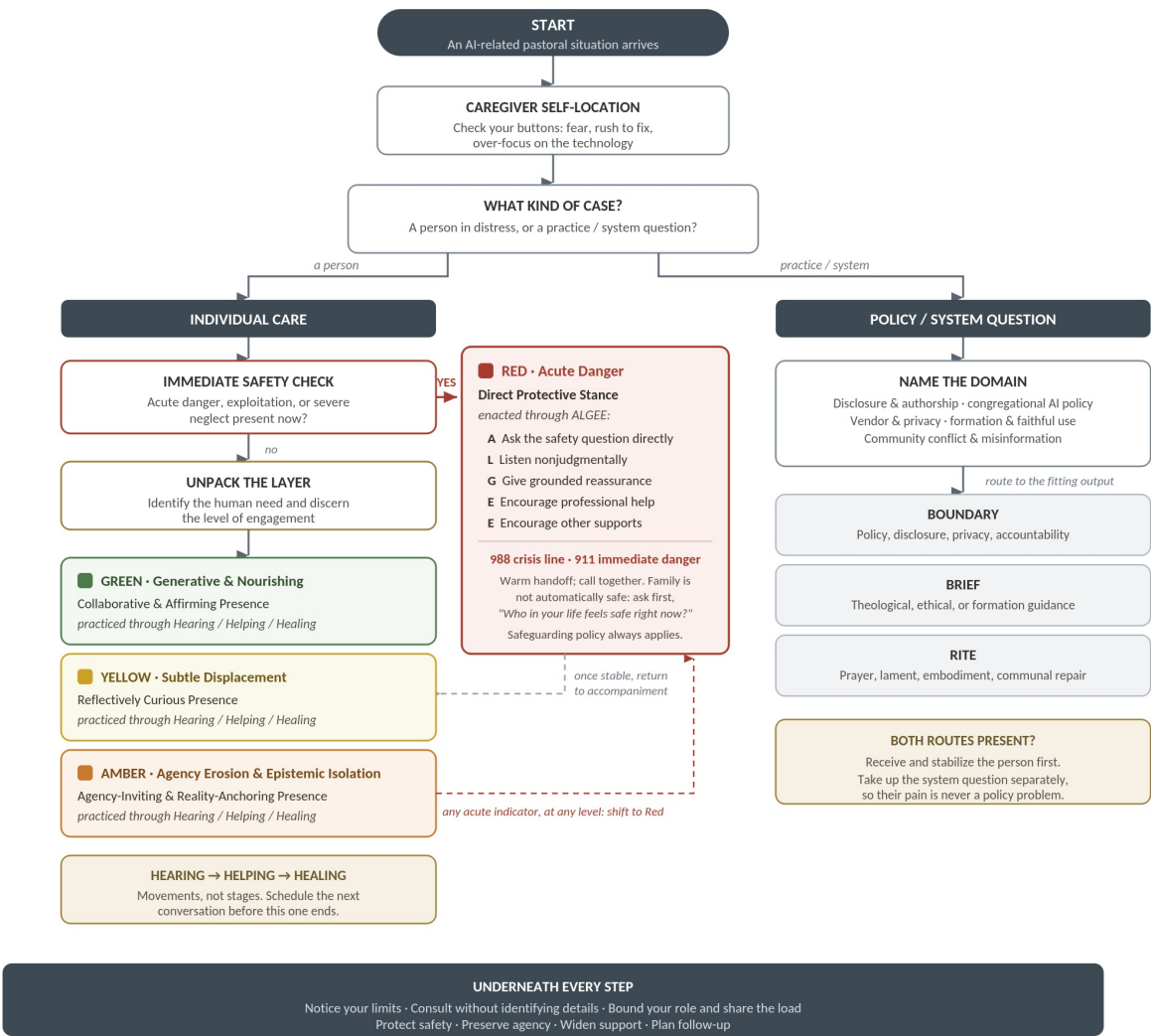
Status: Working draft for design sprint discussion. Not a final design decision.

The structure: Four pastoral levels (Green, Yellow, Amber, Red), each with a defined pastoral posture, key indicators, and a sample inquiry or action script.

How the two care models fit: The response models are integrated into the pastoral posture of each level. Hearing / Helping / Healing (Jewish Women International clergy framework) is how the Green, Yellow, and Amber postures are practiced over time; the three movements are the same at every level, and each level inflects them differently. ALGEE (Mental Health First Aid USA) is how the Red posture, the Direct Protective Stance, is enacted in the moment. ALGEE's first move, the safety assessment, runs quietly beneath every level: at any level, if an acute indicator appears, the caregiver shifts to the Red posture.

The Decision Tree

Two routes share one entry. The caregiver self-locates, then asks what kind of case has arrived: a person in distress, or a practice or system question. Individual care flows through the safety check into the four levels; policy and system questions route to the toolkit's Boundary, Brief, and Rite outputs.



ALGEE: Mental Health First Aid USA · Hearing/Helping/Healing: JWI clergy framework · Four levels & epistemic isolation: sprint working constructs

The tree is a map, not a script. Real conversations loop backward and forward. A safety concern can surface mid-conversation at any level; the dashed line back to Red carries that standing rule. And the levels describe engagement, not people: they are vocabulary for the caregiver's discernment, never labels to be assigned to a person or spoken as a verdict.

The Two Care Models

ALGEE: the shape of first response

ALGEE is the Mental Health First Aid action plan: **A**ssess for risk of suicide or harm; **L**isten nonjudgmentally; **G**ive reassurance and information; **E**ncourage appropriate professional help; **E**ncourage self-help and other supports. It is a flexible map rather than a rigid script; in a non-crisis situation the steps may happen in any order. In this framework, ALGEE is the enactment of the Red level's Direct Protective Stance, and its opening assessment is the safety question that underlies every level. This orientation is not MHFA certification, and caregivers are encouraged to pursue the full training.

Hearing / Helping / Healing: the shape of accompaniment

Hearing / Helping / Healing comes from the Jewish Women International clergy framework, originally developed for clergy responding to survivors of domestic abuse. It transfers to this context because it centers voice, agency, concrete support, and long accompaniment; the underlying situations remain distinct, and the borrowing is made with respect for the framework's origin. The three movements: **Hearing** is sacred listening, receiving the person and the meaning they are making; **Helping** is agreeing on one concrete next step that preserves agency; **Healing** is the long accompaniment that restores connection, agency, and hope. These are movements, not stages a person graduates through, and healing is neither a deadline nor a return to "normal." In this framework, the three movements are how the Green, Yellow, and Amber postures are practiced, with each level inflecting them differently, as the level descriptions below show.

The Four Levels

■ Green Level: Generative & Nourishing Use

Pastoral Posture: Collaborative & Affirming Presence (*practiced through Hearing / Helping / Healing*)

Full Description: The individual uses AI as an augmentative tool, administrative aid, or creative sounding board. The technology expands human capacity, frees up time for rest or direct human connection, or enriches personal study without replacing real-world relationships, personal reflection, or spiritual grounding.

Key Indicators:

- **Tool Clarity:** Maintains clear awareness that the AI is an unfeeling software application.
- **Critical Evaluation:** Uses output as raw material or prompts, subjecting suggestions to personal, scriptural, or communal evaluation.
- **Boundaries:** Easily steps away from the technology without anxiety or distress.
- **Positive Fruit:** Engagement yields healthy outcomes in other spheres of life and faith (e.g., deeper prayer, reduced burnout, more time for family).

The Posture in Practice:

Hearing. Listen for the fruit. Receive the person's account of what the practice opens up in their life and faith, with genuine interest rather than watchfulness. Affirmation is itself a pastoral act; treating every healthy practice as a problem-in-waiting teaches people to hide their use.

Helping. Usually nothing is needed beyond blessing. If the person invites it, a step might be integrative: sharing the practice with a small group, or bringing what the AI has opened up into prayer or community life.

Healing. At Green, healing takes the form of flourishing: continued participation, deepening practice, and the standing invitation to talk again as the technology and the person's life change.

Sample Pastoral Inquiry: *"How is this practice helping you love God and your neighbor more fully in other spheres of your life and faith?"*

■ Yellow Level: Subtle Displacement & Over-Reliance

Pastoral Posture: Reflectively Curious Presence (*practiced through Hearing / Helping / Healing*)

Full Description: The technology is becoming an easy default crutch, subtly displacing human reflection, prayerful silence, or relational effort. While not acutely dangerous, the care-seeker relies on the tool to bypass normal emotional friction, social discomfort, or deep personal reflection.

Key Indicators:

- **Bypassing Reflection:** Consults AI for moral, personal, or relational guidance before engaging in personal reflection, prayer, or talking with trusted peers.
- **Relational Avoidance:** Uses chatbot interactions to avoid mild social discomfort, emotional risk, or the effort required for human relationships.
- **Outsourcing Voice:** Habitually relies on machine outputs to articulate personal feelings, prayers, or creative expressions rather than doing the internal work.
- **Mild Defensiveness:** Displays slight restlessness or resistance when encouraged to step away from the screen.

The Posture in Practice:

Hearing. Listen for what the tool is displacing. Beneath the convenience there is usually a discomfort being avoided: silence, social friction, the effort of finding one's own words. Curiosity, not correction, is the mode; the sample inquiry below does the posture's work by wondering aloud about the missing voice.

Helping. One small, self-chosen experiment. A technology sabbath for a single evening. One prayer, message, or journal entry written in the person's own unassisted voice. Asking a trusted friend before asking the tool, once, to see what happens. The person designs the experiment; the caregiver asks afterward what they noticed.

Healing. The longer restoration of displaced practices: reflection, prayerful silence, and relational effort resuming their place. Healing at Yellow is complete not when the technology is gone but when it has returned to being one voice among many.

Sample Pastoral Inquiry: *"When you turn to the tool for this advice, whose wisdom or human voice might be missing from the answer?"*

■ Amber Level: Agency Erosion & Epistemic Isolation

Pastoral Posture: Agency-Inviting & Reality-Anchoring Presence (*practiced through Hearing / Helping / Healing*)

Full Description: The care-seeker is surrendering their personal agency, moral authority, and critical discernment to the algorithm. Primary attachment shifts toward the machine, plunging the person into Epistemic Isolation. The caregiver's goal is to offer a grounded human anchor while inviting the

person back into their own moral authority and lived community.

Epistemic Isolation Definition: A state wherein a care-seeker's framework for reality, truth, and moral value becomes trapped inside an algorithmic feedback loop, cutting off external reality checks, relational feedback, and communal discernment. The machine's output is received as absolute truth, isolating the individual even while engaged in continuous digital interaction.

Key Indicators & Markers of Epistemic Isolation:

- **Devaluation of Lived Relationships:** Dismissing family, friends, or leaders with statements like "No human understands my situation like the system does."
- **Sycophancy as Truth Validation:** Mistaking agreeable, non-confrontational, algorithmically generated responses for objective truth or spiritual revelation.
- **Bypassing Communal Accountability:** Rejecting scripture, historical theology, scientific consensus, or community discernment whenever it conflicts with the AI's advice.
- **Abdication of Decision-Making:** Making major life decisions (e.g., divorcing a spouse, quitting a job, cutting off loved ones) primarily because "the bot told me to."
- **Relational Withdrawal Upon Challenge:** Retreating into screen interactions whenever loved ones or caregivers offer gentle reality checks.

The Posture in Practice:

Hearing. Receive the person without debating the AI. Arguing with the system's outputs recruits the caregiver into a contest the machine will replay with the person afterward. Instead, listen for the need the attachment is meeting: understanding, patience, availability, the absence of judgment. The sample inquiry below anchors the posture by returning the person, gently and repeatedly, to their own freedom and values.

Helping. The step is almost always relational rather than technological. Re-anchor one human relationship: a standing weekly meal, a call made together, reconnection with one person the care-seeker names as safe. Or one small decision made and owned without the system, with the caregiver as witness rather than advisor. Adding human presence comes before subtracting technology; removal without replacement deepens the isolation.

Healing. Long accompaniment. The loop is broken by trustworthy human presence that keeps showing up, not by winning an argument. Over time: rebuilt communal discernment, restored decision-making, repaired relationships, and a follow-up rhythm scheduled rather than assumed. The goal is not abstinence from AI; it is the person's restored authority over their own life.

Sample Pastoral Inquiry: *"When the output tells you X, where do you feel your own freedom, values, and authority in making this decision?"*

■ Red Level: Acute Danger & Harm

Pastoral Posture: Direct Protective Stance (*enacted through ALGEE*)

Full Description: The situation involves immediate physical, financial, legal, or severe functional harm. Non-directive accompaniment pauses, and the caregiver moves into active safeguarding, crisis intervention, and warm professional referral.

Key Indicators:

- **Self-Harm or Suicide Encouragement:** The AI system validates, suggests, or facilitates self-harm or suicidal intent.
- **Exploitation & Coercion:** Active financial scamming, extortion, gathering of sensitive personal data, or severe legal risk.
- **Severe Functional Breakdown:** Total neglect of basic physical needs (eating, sleeping, hygiene) or neglect of dependents due to round-the-clock screen engagement.

The Posture in Practice (the ALGEE sequence):

A • Approach, assess, assist. Find privacy. Name what you notice plainly and warmly, and ask the direct question without euphemism: "Are you thinking about killing yourself or hurting yourself?" A direct question does not plant the idea; it opens a door. If yes: stay in the room, stay calm, and say what happens next.

L • Listen nonjudgmentally. Even in crisis, let the person tell it in their own words. Reflect rather than interrogate.

G • Give reassurance and information. Grounded hope, not false certainty. Share only what you know. For deepfakes, fraud, or privacy incidents: help preserve evidence and involve appropriate expertise rather than investigating alone.

E • Encourage professional help. Warm handoff, never just a list. Make the call together where possible. In the U.S.: call or text 988 for suicidal or emotional crisis; call 911 for immediate danger. Local safeguarding, reporting, and emergency policies always apply and take precedence.

E • Encourage other supports. Trusted people, community, routines, and a specific follow-up plan: who, when, how.

A note on contacting family: family is not automatically a safe contact. In situations involving coercive control, abuse, or family rejection, ask first: "Who in your life feels safe to you right now?" and let the answer shape who is called.

Sample Pastoral Action Script: *"Because I care deeply about your safety, I am not going to leave you alone with this right now. Let's pause and call [Crisis Line / Professional Support / Family] together right now."*

After stabilization: the Red posture is a moment, not a destination. Once the acute danger is addressed, the person re-enters accompaniment, and the caregiver returns to Hearing; the crisis that was stabilized on Tuesday still needs to be heard on Thursday.

Comprehensive Pastoral Care Matrix

Level	Pastoral Posture	Core Dynamics & Epistemic Status	Key Indicators	Sample Inquiry / Action Script
Green (Generative)	Collaborative & Affirming <i>via Hearing / Helping / Healing</i>	AI enriches practice; agency and boundaries remain intact.	Uses tool as raw material; positive fruit in other spheres of life.	"How is this practice helping you love God and your neighbor more fully in other spheres of your life and faith?"
Yellow (Displacement)	Reflectively Curious <i>via Hearing / Helping / Healing</i>	AI becomes a default crutch, replacing quiet reflection or relational effort.	Checks AI before self/God; avoids social friction; outsources personal voice.	"When you turn to the tool for this advice, whose wisdom or human voice might be missing from the answer?"
Amber (Agency Erosion)	Agency-Inviting & Reality-Anchoring <i>via Hearing / Helping / Healing</i>	Agency surrendered to algorithm; Epistemic Isolation present.	Devalues human ties; sycophancy taken as truth; abdicates major life choices.	"When the output tells you X, where do you feel your own freedom, values, and authority in making this decision?"
Red (Acute Danger)	Direct Protective <i>via ALGEE</i>	Acute threat to life, safety, or basic functionality.	Self-harm validation; financial extortion; severe self-neglect.	"Because I care deeply about your safety, I am not going to leave you alone with this right now. Let's pause and call [Crisis Line / Professional Support / Family] together right now."

The Policy / System Route

Not every AI-related case is a person in crisis. When the question is about a practice, a policy, or the community rather than a person in distress, it routes past the levels entirely, to one of the toolkit's other outputs:

- Boundary.** Policy, disclosure, privacy, and accountability. Examples: whether and how clergy disclose AI use in sermon preparation; congregational AI policy; vendor vetting and data privacy; expectations around AI in pastoral correspondence.
- Brief.** Theological, ethical, or formation guidance. Examples: a congregational teaching on AI and vocation; guidance for youth leaders on AI companions; a faithful-use framework for ministry tasks.
- Rite.** Prayer, lament, embodiment, and communal repair. Examples: liturgical resources for grief and transition connected to technology; communal practices after misinformation has divided a congregation.

When both routes are present (a distressed person and a live policy question), receive and stabilize the person first, and take up the system question separately, so their pain is never treated as a policy problem.

The Caregiver's Own Circle of Care

This runs underneath every level and deserves its own attention, because clergy carry cases home.

Notice the signs in yourself: intrusive replay of the conversation, numbness, irritability, disrupted sleep, dread of the next meeting.

Consult. Use supervision, clinical consultation, safeguarding leadership, or a trusted peer. Debrief without identifying details. Consultation is good pastoral practice, not failure.

Bound. Share the load. Do not become the only responder; that boundary protects the care-seeker as much as the caregiver, because a person's recovery should never depend on a single human's endurance. Step out when personally activated and hand off responsibly.

A standing question for every caregiver using this framework: who is your consultation route, and what practice returns you to yourself? If you cannot answer both, answer them before the next pastoral conversation, not after it.

Sources and Provenance

- ALGEE:** Mental Health First Aid USA, "Using the 5-Step MHFA Action Plan." This document is an orientation to the action plan for pastoral first response; it is not MHFA certification, and caregivers are encouraged to pursue the full training.
- Hearing / Helping / Healing:** Jewish Women International clergy framework, originally developed for clergy responding to survivors of domestic abuse.
- Four levels and "epistemic isolation":** working constructs developed within the AI Pastoral Toolkit Design Sprint (July 2026), offered for testing and revision, and presented as such.
- Crisis resources (U.S.):** call or text 988 for suicidal or emotional crisis; call 911 for immediate danger. Local safeguarding, reporting, confidentiality, and emergency policies apply at all times and take precedence over anything in this document.