

Values-Aligned AI in Christian Ministry: Discipleship, Attention, and the Presence of the Holy Spirit in a Digitalised Ecclesia- *Brendon Naicker*

Abstract

The recent emergence of “values-aligned” artificial intelligence (AI) systems—programmes trained or fine-tuned according to a community’s moral or theological framework—has opened new possibilities for Christian ministry. Churches are beginning to experiment with AI tools that promise to assist pastoral care, sermon preparation, discipleship, and communication. Yet such developments also raise serious theological and ethical questions: *Can a machine truly embody or mediate Christian values? How might its use reshape the practices of attention, relationality, and discernment that lie at the heart of discipleship?*

This paper explores these questions through three interrelated lenses: first, the concept of “values-aligned” AI and its theological implications; second, the ethics of attention as a criterion for faithful technological use; and third, the role of the Holy Spirit in mediating presence and relational authenticity within digital ministry. The central argument advanced here is that Christian engagement with AI must be grounded not in technological optimism or suspicion, but in pneumatological realism—the conviction that genuine transformation and community are brought about not by the efficiency of systems but by the presence of the Spirit.

The Emergence of “Values-Aligned” AI in Ministry

Recent advances in generative AI have enabled the customisation of large models according to particular ethical or theological commitments. Gloo AI, for example, partners with churches to build “values-aligned” systems trained on a congregation’s faith statement and pastoral goals.¹ Such systems promise to support ministers by generating sermons, small-group resources, or communication materials consistent with the church’s theological outlook. Their stated aim is not to replace human leadership but to enhance it through tools that reflect the community’s beliefs.

¹ “Gloo AI: Building Values-Aligned Technology for Ministry,” Christianity Today, May 2025.

The appeal is understandable. Many clergy face increasing administrative pressures, declining attention spans among congregants, and heightened digital competition for focus.² Values-aligned AI appears to relieve some of these burdens while maintaining theological coherence. Yet beneath this practical enthusiasm lies a deeper set of questions about agency, discernment, and incarnation. *Can an algorithm genuinely be aligned with Christian values? Are these values reducible to data-driven parameters? And what becomes of the incarnational character of ministry when it is mediated through a non-personal system?*

Theological Anthropology and the Problem of Alignment

At the heart of “values alignment” lies a particular anthropology: that moral reasoning and theological conviction can be codified, extracted, and computationally replicated. This assumption reflects a modern technocratic confidence that moral reasoning functions like an algorithm to be programmed, rather than a virtue to be cultivated.³ Yet Christian theology locates moral life not in abstract reasoning but in participation—participation in the life of God through the Spirit, expressed in loving relationship with others.⁴

To speak of an AI system being “aligned” with Christian values therefore risks detaching those values from the relationships that give them meaning. The danger is a form of disincarnation, in which moral discernment is reduced from embodied communion to informational correspondence. Christian anthropology insists that human beings are *imago Dei*—creatures called to reflect divine communion through embodied, attentive, and relational life.⁵ An algorithm may imitate moral language, but it cannot share the *imago*, for it lacks the relational depth from which moral action arises.

This is not to suggest that AI tools cannot serve the Church, but rather that their use must remain subordinate to an ecclesial anthropology in which values are lived relationally, not computed. John Zizioulas reminds us that “personhood is not an attribute of substance but an event of communion.”⁶ When AI is employed in ministry, it should therefore be judged by

² Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (London: Penguin, 2016).

³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965).

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.1.3.

⁶ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 27.

whether it deepens communion—directing attention towards God and neighbour—rather than simulating that relation through algorithmic approximation.

The Ethics of Attention

Attention has become one of the defining ethical and spiritual issues of the digital age. Simone Weil described attention as “the rarest and purest form of generosity.”⁷ In contrast, the digital economy monetises attention, fragmenting it across countless screens and stimuli. Even within religious life, worship and teaching risk becoming products competing within this same economy of distraction.

AI, particularly in its generative forms, can either compound or resist this trend. It can flood believers with personalised spiritual content—tailored prayers, devotionals, or reflections—that gratify rather than transform. Christian discipleship, however, is an ascetic reorientation of attention: a deliberate turning from distraction to presence, from consumption to communion.⁸

Thus, the introduction of AI into ministry raises a fundamental question: *does this technology nurture attentiveness to God and neighbour, or does it automate spiritual engagement into a series of predictable outputs?* Values-aligned AI may relieve pastors of repetitive tasks, but it also risks outsourcing the very contemplative labour of prayer and reflection through which pastoral attentiveness is formed.

The moral criterion, therefore, is not whether AI expresses correct doctrine, but whether it sustains the practice of attention that discipleship demands. Ivan Illich’s notion of “convivial tools” is instructive here: technologies should serve human flourishing, not determine it.⁹ A convivial AI would not replace attentiveness but amplify it—helping ministers and congregants to dwell more deeply in the Word and in community life. The challenge is to design and deploy such systems in a manner that enhances attentional depth rather than eroding it.

⁷ Simone Weil, “*Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies,*” in *Waiting for God* (London: Routledge, 1951), 57.

⁸ Brendon Naicker, *Paying Attention: The Lost Spiritual Discipline of the Digital Age* (London: Sower Media, 2025).

⁹ Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1973).

Pneumatology and the Question of Presence

A deeper theological issue concerns presence. Digital ministry, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, has expanded accessibility through livestreamed worship, online counselling, and virtual small groups. While such innovations increase inclusion, they risk diminishing the embodied communion that defines the Church as the Body of Christ.

Here, pneumatology becomes decisive. The Holy Spirit is the divine agent of presence—the one who mediates Christ’s reality beyond spatial and temporal limits.¹⁰ The Spirit, not technology, makes communion possible across distance. Digital tools may serve as instruments through which the Spirit works, but they are not sacramental mediators in themselves.

The danger of “values-aligned” AI lies precisely in this confusion of mediation. If a congregation begins to treat an AI’s recommendations or pastoral responses as authoritative, the locus of discernment shifts from the gathered body guided by the Spirit to the algorithmic logic of a system. This is not to reject technological mediation outright but to re-centre the Spirit as the criterion of presence. As Amos Yong writes, the Spirit’s work is “polyphonic,” capable of moving through diverse media and contexts.¹¹ Yet discernment remains essential: the Church must continue to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1), including the digital ones. When AI is introduced into ministry, the community must ask whether its use manifests the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness—or merely the efficiency of automation.

Discipleship in an Algorithmic Age

The implications for discipleship are profound. Christian formation depends upon embodied practices—shared worship, prayer, the reading of Scripture, and acts of service—that shape the heart and mind. Algorithmic mediation can either aid or distort these practices. When AI curates spiritual material according to one’s preferences, it risks reinforcing consumerist habits—a privatised spirituality without communal accountability.¹²

Conversely, AI can serve the Church when used to encourage deeper participation: identifying those in pastoral need, connecting isolated members, or supporting spiritual mentoring. The key question is teleological: who is being formed, and towards what end? If

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

¹¹ Amos Yong, *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

¹² Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

AI strengthens the Body through mutual care, its use may be understood as a form of diaconal service. But if it forms believers into passive recipients of automated piety, it undermines the active attentiveness that defines discipleship.

This discernment is best framed through virtue ethics rather than rigid moral rules. The issue is not simply whether AI violates commandments, but whether its habitual use cultivates virtues such as patience, humility, and compassion.¹³ Where AI habituates efficiency and convenience, it may instead cultivate haste, pride, and superficiality. The Church’s task, therefore, is to ensure that its technological practices nurture attentiveness to God’s presence, not numb believers to it.

Ecclesial Discernment and Communal Responsibility

An ecclesiological perspective further sharpens this analysis. The Church is not merely an organisation that can adopt new tools; it is a sacramental body, constituted through word, Spirit, and community.¹⁴ Decisions about technology cannot therefore be made on the basis of convenience or innovation alone, but must arise from communal discernment. The early Church tested prophetic claims through gathered deliberation (Acts 15); the digital Church must similarly test technological claims through prayerful theological reflection.

A “values-aligned” AI that functions without accountability to the ecclesial body risks replicating the logic of technological capitalism—where systems shape practice before ethics can respond. The Church must reverse this order: formation before function, ethics before efficiency. This might include explicit liturgical acts of commissioning new technologies, transparent communication about their operation, and continual evaluation of their effects on the life of the community. Discernment must become a habitual spiritual discipline in technological adoption.

The Limits of Alignment and the Mystery of Grace

Even if an AI system could perfectly mirror Christian moral reasoning, it would remain incapable of grace. Grace is not a rule but a gift; not alignment but transformation. AI, however sophisticated, functions through correlation and prediction—it cannot forgive, surprise, or redeem. Its horizon is probabilistic, not eschatological. Any theology of AI in

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

¹⁴ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

ministry must therefore acknowledge the ontological gulf between algorithmic logic and divine grace.

The danger of “values alignment” lies in the illusion of sanctity: that technology reflecting our moral codes is thereby good. Augustine reminds us that evil does not lie in the object itself but in its use.¹⁵ Even “aligned” technologies require continual moral conversion in their use. The task of the Church, then, is to live graciously with technology—to employ it as a servant of communion while guarding against its idolatrous potential.

Towards a Pneumatological Ethic of Digital Ministry

A constructive response begins with pneumatological realism: the conviction that the Holy Spirit, not technology, is the true agent of ministry. From this flows a pneumatological ethic for digital ministry:

- I. Instrumental humility – AI may assist ministry but cannot mediate salvation.
- II. Attentional formation – technology must deepen attentiveness to God and neighbour.
- III. Communal discernment – adoption of tools must remain accountable to the gathered body.
- IV. Transparency and truthfulness – congregations must know when and how AI is being used.
- V. Preferential human presence – wherever possible, human contact should be prioritised over automation.

Such principles echo Paul’s teaching on the spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12): the Spirit distributes tools and capacities for the common good. AI may indeed become one such tool, but, like all gifts, it must be tested, interpreted, and governed by love.

Conclusion: The Spirit and the System

The incorporation of “values-aligned” AI into Christian ministry represents both an opportunity and a temptation. It offers new efficiencies and outreach possibilities, yet risks substituting technological discernment for spiritual discernment. The crucial question is not whether AI can articulate Christian values, but whether its use draws the Church deeper into the life of the Spirit.

¹⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.40.

As digital culture increasingly mediates human experience, the Church is called to witness to another form of mediation—the incarnational and pneumatic presence of Christ among his people. AI may assist the administration of ministry, but the transformation of persons remains the Spirit’s work alone. Faithfulness in a digitalised ecclesia will therefore depend not on how well our machines align with our statements of faith, but on how fully our attention aligns with the living presence of God.

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