**What Is AI and Why Should My Congregation Care?**

By Manohar (Mantu) Joshi



*This article is a primer for those wanting to speak intelligently about AI and/or those who are trying to understand how to practically engage the topic in a faith community. Follow Pastor Manohar Joshi (aka Mantu) as he takes on this topic on a dare from a friend and finds that the topic is more relatable and relevant than most people might think****.***

Last summer, a retired minister in the congregation dared me as lead pastor to preach on artificial intelligence, abbreviated as AI. As a fish swims to the shiny baited hook, the *Star Trek*-watching, sci-fi geek in me just could not help but bite on the silicon chip lure she had just cast. I became curious and had to bite into some research. What is AI and why should any of us care?

Most of my congregation was bewildered that I planned to teach about such a topic and for nearly a whole month. We had just experienced a worship series about our stained-glass/faceted windows, and now we were jumping to the topic of AI?!

To approach this highly relevant topic that most of my leadership seemed not to know or care about, I decided to have them experience AI first during a sermon, rather than explain it. We started the first message by using a readily available form of AI called ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer). Essentially, this is a technology tool made to answer questions and have conversations in everyday language with real people (Rouse, “ChatGPT”).

On a free cell phone app version, I asked *ChatGPT* how a person should live as a Christian. I also asked two people in the congregation to submit responses to the same question. When I read out loud the two *real-people* responses along with the *AI* response without identifying the author, I asked the congregation to pick out the artificial intelligence response out of the three. Only a third of my congregation could. At this point, the congregation was leaning forward for the first time since I introduced the topic. I explained to them that they had just proved the “Turing Test,” a 1950s understanding of when technology had crossed the line into artificial intelligence (Thacker, *The Age of AI*).

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Issues affected by AI are immediately relevant to us in the twenty-first century. From the pulpit, I said that if a person is accused of a crime in court, a judge today might choose to use AI to assess whether or not the person is a flight risk (Andrea Vicini, “Artificial Intelligence and Social Control”). There is even the possibility that a person arrested could have bail set by artificial intelligence! AI could also be used to determine whether a person could get a loan and at what rate (Herzfeld, *The Artifice of Intelligence*).

At this point, I could see that people were seeing the relevance of the topic, but they still seemed to lack understanding of what artificial intelligence is and how it works. Nobody was yawning or staring off into the distance, but a few had that quizzical look that told me that I had to keep things simple and relatable to their context. Here are some ideas on how to explain difficult AI concepts in simple and relevant ways.

**1. AI works better today because of something called “deep learning.”**

To understand AI and how it has grown recently, we must move beyond thinking of AI as something that stands still and operates like an automated car wash. AI is not just a machine working like the brushes and sprays adjusting to the size of the vehicle passing by. AI is more like getting a hand-wash by a human service team that sees how and what your individual car needs. Even more than that, AI is like the cleaning team that learns with each vehicle and gets better at identifying the right wax or touch-up you might need based on experience over time.  
  
AI learns similarly to the way that we do, and it assimilates information in layers (Coursera, “Deep Learning vs. Machine Learning”).  
  
For my congregation, I compared AI’s “deep learning” using the logic of a fourth-grade teacher who reviews arithmetic before venturing into multiplication. In the same way, AI is gathering insight and context to understand the next concept. It starts simply, but by learning in layers, it can begin to reason more like a human being.

**2. AI has advanced far beyond ordering from a catalog or playing chess online.**

If you tell someone you use AI to buy furniture from IKEA virtually or to find other buying options on Amazon, you are not wrong, BUT you are dated. It used to be that AI was good only at singular functions and calculations. In the old days (OK, like two years ago. . .), with enough data, a computer could beat a chess master at chess because the computer could “think” through every option. Now, with AI, the computer could learn to watch you play and put together a step-by-step curriculum tailored to make you better. . . in its opinion *(Thacker, The Age of AI*).

**3. AI is both hope and hazard.**

AI has both positives and negatives. On the hopeful side, AI is a tool of creative companionship that may move us out of our limited experiences and help us develop novel solutions. AI may be able to tackle complex global problems such as climate change by considering variables across the globe. People with disabilities have a lot to gain as machines bridge gaps in access. I shared with my congregation that my spouse, who is blind, uses an AI application on the phone to read traffic pedestrian signals in real time. We tried it out, and it has not been wrong yet!   
  
The power of AI can also be destructive. Nefarious users could instruct AI to disrupt a country’s power grid or aid internet burglars in stealing identities. I shared with the congregation a national news story of an eight-month pregnant African American woman who was mistakenly identified by AI as a carjacker. She was held in prison for a crime she did not commit. The AI did not consider that the perpetrator in the surveillance videos was not pregnant (“Detroit Woman Sues City”).

**4. AI is highly relevant to understanding ourselves and our faith.**

Here are a few ideas to jump-start the discussion on AI in a faith setting and cut through any reticence or indifference about the topic.

* Use AI to discuss what it means to be human and made in God’s image. Is there something about wisdom that transcends knowledge? Humans are called to be wise more than knowledgeable.
* Take seriously the reality that AI technology has already shown it learns the same kinds of biases that humans do (Chen, “Ethics and Discrimination in Artificial Intelligence”). How does the prophet Micah’s call in the Bible to seek justice (Micah 6:8) cause us to question equality for all in things such as facial recognition technology, for example?
* When the Bible says, “Fear Not!” (Isaiah 41:10), can that also apply to technology? In what ways can the church be a courageous leader in using and curating these new AI tools?

As a pastor, I understand each of us has a different context, and understanding culture is key for making teaching relevant. Our congregation is in an urban/suburban neighborhood, and it includes many schoolteachers and service-oriented individuals who also live connected to Silicon Valley.

To see how our congregation is plugged into AI in our context, please watch us make this attempt [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwmOBsVEM6k) on YouTube. Feel free to email me questions or comments ([pastormantu@walnutcreekumc.org](mailto:pastormantu@walnutcreekumc.org)). It worked for us! We had more youth and adult children of our older members attend this series in the summer than even major holidays. We received feedback that they (mostly millennials and Gen Zs) cared deeply about this topic, and the series captured their curiosity both in-person and online.

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*Like so many faith communities, Walnut Creek is struggling to regain its relevance and vitality after the pandemic but is making great strides through the dedicated work of its people. In one year together with their new pastor, the people have increased their outreach to people on the margins by 500%, and online and in-person attendance has strongly recovered and is bucking trends. Revitalizing this congregation has included creative worship with relevant topics. To see this sermon series in context, you can find them on YouTube* [*here*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwmOBsVEM6k)*. Also, visit* [*walnutcreekumc.org*](https://walnutcreekumc.org/)*.*

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