

Pastors Using AI to Help Write Sermons Grapple With Where to Draw the Line

A divide is growing over AI-assisted preaching in American churches; ‘Martin Luther is rolling over in his grave.’

By [Anvee Bhutani](#)

July 19, 2026 5:30 am ET

OKLAHOMA CITY—On a Saturday afternoon about 20 hours before he was due to preach, Darrell Stetler II sat behind a two-monitor workstation crammed into the sound booth of his church, a slide deck glowing on one screen and ChatGPT open on another.

A sermon titled “Forged,” part of a summerlong journey through the Book of Proverbs, was taking shape somewhere between his own notes and a handful of AI chatbots.

When he opened Claude, it greeted him by name: “Back at it, Disciple-maker.”

Stetler has spent more than two decades building Oklahoma City’s Bible Methodist Church, where he is lead pastor, largely from nothing. He is also part of ChatGPT’s top 1% of users, runs a Facebook group of 500 pastors experimenting with the technology and has built a tool that can spit out dozens of sermon illustrations in seconds.

Yet few pastors sound more AI-wary than Stetler. “This AI does not enjoy what it finds,” he said. “It cannot love it.”



Stetler, who is among ChatGPT’s top 1% of users, uses AI to plan and illustrate his sermons.

The wariness coexists with real financial pressure. Stetler, a married father of seven, makes \$600 a week, plus a \$1,500 monthly housing stipend that is less than his housing costs. His church keeps about two months of reserves. He takes construction jobs on the side, on top of a small side business creating resources, such as curriculum, for other pastors. A sermon used to take him 10 to 15 hours to prepare; a chatbot doing first-pass research and phrasing shaves off several of them.

He said the time he saves goes toward people. Earlier that day, he had sat at the hospital bedside of a congregation member. Halfway through his sermon prep, his phone rang again: another hospital visit request. Those hours, he said, are what the AI is buying back.

Half of all pastors say they use AI for brainstorming or idea generation, according to the Barna Group, a firm that studies U.S. faith trends. And roughly a quarter use AI to help write their sermons, up from 12% in 2024. The trend has drawn theological pushback all the way to the Vatican: Earlier this year, Pope Leo XIV warned clergy that to give a true homily is to share faith. Artificial intelligence, the pope said, can't do that.

Stetler, 45, has more or less made peace with the tension. He quoted a passage from Isaiah 29:13 condemning hypocrisy—*This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me*—as a kind of warning label for his own habits. Once, mid-prep, Stetler recalled, ChatGPT signed off a quirky reply: “Praying for you as you preach,” the chatbot wrote. Stetler laughed out loud. “No you’re not,” he thought.

PastorGPT

In California, the self-described tech-forward Rev. Justin Lester, 37, has taken the experiment further. He came home after an Nvidia developer conference with Theo, a robot dog trained on Lester's own sermons that trots his church's aisles on Sundays.



Rev. Justin Lester's robot dog, Theo, is a constant presence on Sundays at his church.

DK HAMMONDS/DK CONSULTS, LLC

Theo is the visible edge of a larger system Lester built called PastorGPT: a free, small-language model. Trained entirely on a given pastor's sermons and teaching, PastorGPT refreshes itself automatically each week by downloading and transcribing new sermon uploads from YouTube. More than 30 churches now run versions of it.

Built into the system, he said, is a kind of pastoral early-warning function. Anonymized data flags recurring themes in what congregants are confiding to the bot. Last year, he said, it surfaced a surge in teenagers talking about bullying, so he built a lesson around it.

Not every pastor treats AI as a mere aid. **Rev. Dwight Lee Wolter**, of the historic Congregational Church of Patchogue on Long Island, N.Y., turned to ChatGPT at an especially emotional moment: the 2024 assassination attempt on Donald Trump at a Pennsylvania campaign rally. Wolter asked the chatbot what he should tell his congregation the next morning. It produced, he said, a nearly perfect prayer. He also used AI to do the call to worship, the prayers, and to write new hymns complete with AI-generated music.

Wolter, 75, is careful to note he didn't disappear into the experiment. "Dwight is here," he said. "He didn't abdicate." But he is also blunt about where he thinks things are heading. "I cannot imagine that a time is not coming that AI will present us with a God that's more attractive and more flexible and 24/7," he said, a prospect that unsettles fellow clergy more than it does him. "When I bring that up to clergy, it's like, oh my God."

'I'm really torn'

Using AI in the pulpit alarms critics. Meghan Sullivan, a University of Notre Dame professor of philosophy who is leading a research project on AI and religion, said that using AI to draft anything spoken in worship reflects a basic misunderstanding of what Christians believe is happening when a preacher delivers a homily.

Churches, in her view, might be among the last institutions where people are asked to sit still, in silence, and encounter another human being without mediation. "Martin Luther is rolling over in his grave," she said, at the idea of handing scripture off to what she calls a theological software middleman.

Stetler, the Oklahoma City pastor, has made mistakes with AI. Two years ago, rushing to finish a slide for a sermon on a South Pacific missionary, he dropped in an AI-generated image without checking it closely. After the service, a congregant approached him. "Did you make that with AI?" Yes, he said. "Did you know there's a topless woman in the background?" He apologized on the spot. He tells that story now as a cautionary tale to anyone he's introducing to the tools. "I don't need to rush this."

Talking later about the temptation to let AI do too much, his voice broke.

"I have to care about Darrell's heart," he said, referring to himself and tearing up. "I want my heart to be in the place it ought to be. Nothing goes into it until I've gone through it."

During a recent Sunday sermon, Stetler was working through his AI-generated “Seven Domains” handout, when it fell out of sync with his slides. “AI has failed me,” he told worshippers. “It’s really messed me up.”

Reactions to his AI tools were mixed. One congregant, Chad Christiansen, 48, said he uses AI to make images for his youth nonprofit and is taking an agentic-AI course alongside Stetler himself.

But Elizabeth Hughes, a 67-year-old children’s-ministry volunteer, was blunt about her resistance.

“I hate AI,” she said. “I like creativity.” A year ago, Stetler handed her AI-generated curriculum material, and she had felt, in her words, lazy. But her husband uses the tools constantly, and between him and the pastor, she said, “they’ve won me over.”

Stetler worried about a future generation of AI-reliant pastors. “I’m really torn,” he said. “I would recommend guys use it lightly.” What concerns him isn’t the tool itself so much as what it could let a lazier version of himself get away with. “Preaching is truth through personality,” he said. Then, he turned back to his two monitors, and kept prompting.