

Healing touch: Experiencing Christ in the Age of Homo-Digitalis in a South African urban Pentecostal context

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Abstract

In an age increasingly mediated by digital technology, this article explores how South African Pentecostal churches engage with digital faith practices, particularly regarding healing, presence, and embodiment. Rooted in ecclesial theology and African Pentecostal spirituality, the study investigates how the healing touch of Christ – symbolised in the biblical account of the woman who touched Jesus’ garment (Mk 5:25–34) – is reimagined in digital worship contexts. The central research question guiding the inquiry asks: How does digital technology impact the theological understanding of embodied faith and healing in an urban South African Pentecostal-Christian context? Drawing on qualitative reflections from pastoral workshops, theological literature, and contextual African theology, the article examines themes such as virtual sacraments, online discipleship, and AI-assisted ministry. This approach highlights both the transformative possibilities and ethical tensions of digital spirituality, encouraging a hybrid model of faith formation that honours traditional Pentecostal commitments while embracing technological innovation.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence; digital ethics; virtual worship; homo-digitalis; theology

1. Introduction

In an era where digital technology permeates nearly every aspect of life, human interaction is increasingly mediated through screens, algorithms, and virtual connections. This new reality, characterised by the rise of “Homo-

Digitalis”¹ – humans deeply integrated with digital tools – raises profound theological questions about faith, community, and divine encounters. The tangible and relational nature of Christianity, symbolised by the woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ garment in Mark 5:25–34, seems at odds with digital interactions. Yet, this story offers a lens for reimagining how believers might experience Christ’s healing touch in a digital context. While Bosch (2011:47) explored paradigm shifts in mission theology, his insights are instructive for understanding the church’s response to technological change. Similarly, Mbiti (1989:78) offers foundational views on spiritual presence in African contexts that inform this reflection.

In the current academic discourse, the church, as both a spiritual and social institution, is navigating uncharted territory as it integrates technology into its ministries. Virtual worship services, online prayer groups, and digital discipleship have emerged as significant platforms for nurturing faith. However, these developments also challenge long-standing theological understandings of community, worship, and the role of personal interaction in spiritual growth. As many theological scholars have noted, technology must remain a tool that enhances spiritual life without compromising its relational essence (Masweneng 2023; Adventist News Network 2024). The task, then, is to discern how technology might serve as a conduit for divine encounters while preserving the personal, embodied aspects of faith.

This article explores how the church can create opportunities for spiritual touch in a digital context, embracing technology as a means of renewal and connection. It examines how believers have experienced transformative encounters through virtual worship, online communities, and digital

1 *Homo-Digitalis* refers to the emerging human condition shaped by continuous immersion in digital technologies – marked by algorithmic mediation, virtual presence, and networked identity. Theologically, it represents a shift in anthropological self-understanding, where embodiment, community, and sacramentality are reinterpreted through disembodied digital interfaces. Adapted from: Evreeva, O.A., Kuzmin, P.A. & Rupova, R.M., 2024. Liturgical Ministry of the Orthodox Church as an Alternative to the Challenges of Digitalisation of Modern Society. [Online] [Accessed: 10 June 2025].

scripture engagement. Furthermore, it addresses the challenges of distraction and superficiality in digital spaces, emphasising the importance of intentionality and authentic relationships in fostering spiritual growth. To do so, the article employs theological reflection grounded in Pentecostal spirituality and African ecclesiology, and draws on contextual data from pastoral workshops, documented ecclesial insights, and relevant theological literature. This multi-source approach allows for a critical yet contextually rooted exploration of digital faith practices in South African Pentecostal churches.

This study explores significant theological, technological, hermeneutical, and ethical questions surrounding digital faith. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How does digital technology impact the theological understanding of embodied faith and healing in an urban South African Pentecostal context?

By reflecting on the evolving relationship between faith and technology, this article invites readers to consider how the “healing touch” of Christ might be experienced anew in the digital age, not as a disembodied abstraction, but as a mediated form of encounter within the lived realities of urban South African Pentecostalism. In a context where physical healing, spiritual encounter, and embodied worship are deeply integrated into theological practice, the rise of digital platforms challenges the Church to discern how faith communities can foster authentic, relational, and Spirit-filled experiences of God in online environments. This reflection seeks to illuminate how theological understandings of embodiment and healing are being reshaped, without compromising the relational ethos at the heart of Pentecostal spirituality.

2. Theology in the Digital Age: Technology, AI, and the *Imago Dei*

In an age of accelerating technological advancement, distinguishing between general technology and artificial intelligence (AI) is not merely a technical necessity but a theological imperative. While technology broadly refers to tools and systems that extend human capability, ranging from microphones to mobile apps, AI constitutes a more radical development: the design of machines capable of mimicking cognitive processes such as

learning, reasoning, and autonomous decision-making (Russell & Norvig 2020:4). This distinction is particularly relevant in ecclesial contexts where spiritual agency and relational presence are central to pastoral care and healing. From a theological standpoint, especially within Pentecostal and African Christian traditions that emphasise the Spirit's direct activity and the embodiment of faith, AI challenges traditional conceptions of *imago Dei* – the image of God in humanity (Gen 1:26–27). Gunkel (2017:112) notes that AI, while sophisticated, lacks moral agency, consciousness, and relationality, qualities considered essential to being made in God's image. As Cloete (2015:3) argues, digital tools should serve faith rather than redefine it, and any technological system that imitates human decision-making must be assessed against core theological values such as accountability, incarnation, and spiritual discernment. Therefore, understanding the theological implications of AI versus general technology is crucial for navigating how such tools are integrated or resisted within Pentecostal expressions of embodied worship and healing ministry in digitally mediated urban environments.

Building on this, the theological affirmation that human creativity reflects the *imago Dei* suggests that technological innovation, when ethically employed, can participate in the divine mandate to cultivate and steward creation (Bosch 2011:63). Yet, such stewardship depends on maintaining a clear theological boundary between the tools humans use and the essence of human personhood. While AI systems can simulate decision-making, they remain devoid of spiritual consciousness, moral discernment, and the capacity for divine relationship (Gustafson 2023:45). These limitations raise critical questions for theology and ministry: Can AI contribute meaningfully to the Church's mission without undermining its incarnational and relational foundations? Can it support, rather than substitute, the deeply embodied pastoral care central to Pentecostal praxis?

This article argues for a contextually grounded, ethically informed integration of AI, as a servant technology, capable of assisting in ministry tasks such as education, administration, and communication, while leaving intact the Spirit-led, relational core of Christian healing and worship.

3. AI and human autonomy: Theological implications

A pressing theological concern is AI's growing capacity for autonomous decision-making and its implications for human autonomy and moral agency. While AI systems, particularly those using machine learning, can adapt and generate responses based on data (Goodfellow et. al. 2016), they do not possess true autonomy in the theological or moral sense. Rather, their outputs are entirely dependent on human-defined inputs, training models, and system prompts. As such, AI systems function in response to human initiation, lacking intentionality, moral consciousness, or spiritual discernment. This distinction is critical: while AI can simulate human reasoning, it cannot bear moral responsibility. Theological reflection must therefore safeguard the primacy of human agency as a divine gift rooted in the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26–27; Gunkel 2017:112). Without this clarity, there is a risk of misattributing responsibility to tools that merely extend but do not originate ethical action (Brey 2005; Sullins 2021).

In religious contexts, moral agency and the ability to make free, responsible choices are seen as integral to being human. AI's increasing autonomy forces theologians to grapple with how such systems influence human decision-making and ethical behaviour. This interplay between human accountability and technological determinism necessitates careful reflection to preserve human dignity and freedom.

In an African theological context, the communal nature of spirituality shapes how technology, including AI, is understood and applied. Mbiti (1989) emphasises the collective nature of faith in African Christianity, where spiritual growth is deeply relational. This communal focus highlights opportunities for digital discipleship but also exposes limitations in fostering authentic spiritual connections online.

3.1 AI and the Church: Ethical Stewardship and Digital Discipleship

Theologically, humanity's role as steward of creation (Genesis 2:15) extends beyond the natural environment into the digital domain. This includes emerging technologies like AI, which must be approached not with fear or blind enthusiasm, but through a lens of discernment rooted in the Church's missional and ethical calling. As Cloete (2015:2) argues, digital tools should

not dictate Christian practice but serve it, enabling the Church to engage new contexts while safeguarding the core of its theological identity.

Within this framework, AI may be employed to support ministry functions such as sermon preparation, digital archiving, administrative management, and virtual connectivity. These uses align with the Church's historical adaptation of communication tools, from the scroll to the printing press to livestreaming, each representing a new form of witness. However, theological reflection warns against conflating utility with spiritual agency. AI cannot replicate the relational, sacramental, and Spirit-embodied dimensions of ministry that lie at the heart of pastoral care, prayer, and discipleship (Campbell 2021:94; Gunkel 2017:112). To do so would risk reducing faith to function and presence to performance.

The ethical stewardship of AI thus demands a clear boundary between what technology can assist and what it must never replace. Cloete (2015:3) rightly notes that ethical use of AI must promote human flourishing, but within ecclesial contexts, this must be further grounded in theological values, such as *koinonia* (communion), *agape* (self-giving love), and incarnation (embodied ministry). Sullins (2021:77) reminds us that AI's non-human status excludes it from participating in covenantal or spiritual relationships, reaffirming that only human agents, made in the image of God, can reflect divine relationality.

Therefore, AI's role within the Church should be framed not merely as a productivity enhancer, but as a tool of mission shaped by theological integrity. When properly situated, it can extend the reach of discipleship, support faith formation, and enrich teaching without replacing the deeply embodied and relational essence of the Christian life. This balance between technological adoption and theological caution ensures that digital discipleship remains rooted in divine presence rather than algorithmic simulation.

The theological implications of AI call for sustained engagement across doctrine, ethics, and ministry praxis. As a created tool, AI can support the Church's mission, but it must remain subject to the discernment of Spirit-led communities. When framed as a servant rather than a substitute, AI has the potential to enrich Christian ministry without displacing the relational, embodied, and spiritual dimensions that define it. By grounding

its use in a theology that safeguards dignity, agency, and presence, the Church affirms its responsibility to ensure that digital innovation enhances rather than erodes what it means to be made in the image of God.

4. Virtual worship and embodied faith: The question of the “Healing touch”

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital tools for worship and fellowship. Virtual church services, online prayer groups, and digital Bible studies have enabled Christians to stay connected to their faith communities and the Word of God despite physical distance. Digital platforms enable the formation of virtual communities that transcend geographical boundaries, fostering global networks of faith (Adogame 2021:132). Cloete (2015, cited in Mokoena 2023:2) posits that “the virtual community that is formed is described as belonging to individuals rather than individuals belonging to a community.” Virtual communities can be argued to be contextual even when users within a community are in different geographical locations. Virtual communities transcend the ‘physical’ world. These spaces offer opportunities for shared prayer, testimony, and discipleship, creating a sense of connectedness despite physical separation. In many ways, these tools have reshaped how believers encounter Christ, offering new avenues for participation and engagement. Campbell (2021:56) posits, sustaining authenticity in digital relationships requires intentionality and vigilance against superficiality.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many Pentecostal churches in South Africa expressed significant resistance to the use of musical instruments in worship, viewing them as foreign or secular tools incompatible with sacred worship (Anderson 2001:142). Theological arguments often centred on the perceived purity of unaccompanied vocal praise as the only acceptable form of worship, rooted in a desire to preserve the sanctity of the church. Yet over time, as understanding deepened and the Spirit’s leading became evident, instruments such as keyboards, guitars, and drums found their place in the worship of God, not as foreign intrusions but as extensions of human creativity offered back to the Creator. This journey teaches us a valuable theological principle: the sanctification of tools and technologies occurs not through their rejection but through their consecration to the

glory of God. Musical instruments were redeemed as vehicles to enhance worship, enabling congregations to express their adoration in ways that resonate with their cultural and generational contexts.

Today, we stand at a similar crossroads with the advent of artificial intelligence. Initial resistance to AI within the church may arise from fears of its secular origins, concerns about ethical misuse, or anxiety over its potential to depersonalise ministry. These fears, while understandable, must be tempered by a deeper theological reflection on technology as part of God's providence. As human creativity flows from the *imago Dei*, the image of God within us, so too does the potential for AI to serve as a tool for God's purposes. Theological discernment calls us not to reject AI outright but to seek ways to consecrate it for ministry. Just as musical instruments amplify worship, AI can assist the church in preaching, teaching, administration, outreach, and even fostering deeper engagement with Scripture. The tools themselves are not inherently holy or unholy; their moral value lies in how they are used and to what end. If dedicated to advancing the Kingdom of God, AI can become a means of embodying the church's mission more effectively. We must also remember that the church is not led by technology but by the Spirit of God. AI must never replace human relationships, pastoral care, or the discernment of the Spirit. Instead, it should complement and enhance these, becoming a servant rather than a master. In the same way that Pentecostal churches eventually embraced musical instruments as an expression of worship, we may find that AI, when approached prayerfully and wisely, will become an integral part of how the church fulfils its mission in this generation. Let us, therefore, approach this opportunity with discernment, faith, and a willingness to see how God might use even this technology for His glory.

Research shows that virtual services can foster a sense of belonging, particularly for those unable to attend physical services due to illness or geographical constraints (Masweneng 2023:3). Similarly, digital platforms like prayer apps, Bible study groups, and Christian podcasts provide ongoing spiritual nourishment, ensuring that the "healing touch" of Christ is accessible at any time and in any place. Yet, critics argue that digital worship often lacks the embodied relationality essential to Christian spiritual growth and faith (Adventist News Network 2024:6). African theologians like Adogame (2021) highlight the importance of preserving

communal values in digital contexts. Adogame (2021:139) suggests that digital platforms should reflect the communal ethos central to African Christianity, ensuring that virtual interactions promote mutual care and spiritual growth. Even so, many pastors and church leaders have pointed out that, even in a digital context, the Holy Spirit can still move powerfully, touching hearts through the Word of God as it is preached or shared online.

Building on the role of digital platforms, AI has emerged as a significant technological force in church operations. AI tools, from sermon preparation aids to digital evangelism assistants, optimise administrative tasks and expand outreach. However, these advancements raise ethical and theological concerns about free will, moral agency, and human dignity (Sullins 2021:23; Brey 2005:31). Ethical guidelines are crucial to ensure AI enhances the relational essence of ministry, supporting rather than replacing the human elements of spiritual care.

The rise of virtual worship has transformed how many Christians engage with their faith. While online services offer accessibility and connection, they also raise important theological and experiential questions. One of the most profound concerns is whether the “healing touch” of faith, understood as the physical, sacramental, and communal aspects of worship, can be fully realised in digital spaces. Does something essential get lost when worship is mediated through a screen? Or can virtual experiences convey the same depth of presence and transformation?

This discussion invites us to explore worship through three key dimensions: its embodied nature, the role of touch in healing, and the psychological impact of digital versus in-person faith practices.

4.1 Embodiment in worship: Theology and liturgy

Christian worship has always been deeply embodied. From baptism to communion, the sacraments involve physical presence, touch, and tangible elements like water, bread, and oil. The very foundation of Christian belief—the incarnation—underscores the significance of the body in faith: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

Scholars like James K.A. Smith argue that worship is not just about intellectual engagement but is formed through physical participation, ritual movements, and sensory experience. The laying on of hands, the

communal singing, and the shared meal of the Eucharist all reinforce the idea that faith is lived in the body.

By contrast, virtual worship removes many of these elements. While digital platforms allow for prayer, preaching, and even attempts at virtual sacraments, they lack the tactile, face-to-face interactions that have historically defined Christian worship. For instance, some churches experimented with online Eucharist or digital communion during the COVID-19 pandemic, practices that sparked robust theological debate about the legitimacy of sacramental presence without physical gathering (Campbell 2021:116; Spadaro 2020:3). Watching communion through a screen is not the same as receiving it in person. The absence of embodied presence raises questions about whether digital worship can ever fully replace incarnational expressions of faith.

4.2 The healing touch: Presence, proximity, and spiritual efficacy

Healing has always been a central aspect of Christian ministry, particularly within Pentecostal and charismatic traditions, where it is seen as both a sign of divine compassion and a demonstration of the kingdom of God breaking into the present (Anderson 2004:103; Yong 2005: 187). This healing ministry is often mediated through physical touch. Jesus' healing miracles frequently involved direct physical contact, whether touching the eyes of the blind, holding the hand of Jairus' sick daughter, or allowing the woman with the issue of blood to touch his garment (Mk 5:25–34). This embodied aspect of healing has continued in Christian traditions through practices like anointing with oil and the laying on of hands (James 5:14). The theological rationale of these acts lies in their affirmation of incarnational presence and rational faith. Yet, in an increasingly digital context, one must ask: can virtual interactions convey the same spiritual power and relational depth?

Scholars and practitioners have increasingly argued that digital technology can expand the possibilities for healing and spiritual connection. For example, Campell (2020: 64) highlights how online prayer groups, livestreamed healing services, and digital pastoral counselling have provided comfort to many, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Thomas and van den Berg (2021:88) document testimonies from believers who have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit during virtual

worship, suggesting that divine power is not limited by physical space. These accounts challenge narrow conceptions of embodiment by demonstrating how spiritual presence may be mediated, though differently, through digital means.

4.2.1 The psychology of digital worship: Connection or isolation?

Beyond theological concerns, there are also psychological and communal implications of shifting worship online. Research on digital communication suggests that while virtual interactions can be meaningful, they often lack the depth of face-to-face encounters. Sherry Turkle, in *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015), argues that digital connections tend to be more fragmented and less immersive than in-person relationships.

Christian worship is not just about consuming content – it is about participation, presence, and relational belonging. There is a risk that virtual worship could encourage a more individualistic, consumer-oriented faith, where believers tune in at their convenience rather than engaging deeply with a worshipping community. The shift from “we are the body of Christ” to “I watch church online when I have time” could subtly change how people experience church life and spiritual formation.

4.2 The limits and possibilities of virtual worship

While virtual worship presents challenges, it also offers new possibilities:

Accessibility: Those who are homebound, disabled, or geographically isolated can now participate in ways they previously could not.

Global Connection: Digital platforms allow believers from different cultures and regions to worship together, reinforcing the universal nature of the Church.

Emerging Technologies: Innovations in augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) are creating more immersive worship experiences, potentially bridging the gap between digital and physical worship.

However, these advancements do not answer deeper theological questions. Can digital sacraments ever be truly sacramental? Does virtual worship shape faith formation differently than in-person gatherings? At what point does disembodied worship undermine the incarnational nature of Christianity?

These questions have become increasingly urgent for churches navigating post-pandemic realities. Rather than viewing physical and digital worship as mutually exclusive, emerging ecclesiological consensus, particularly in global and African contexts, points toward a hybrid model as both viable and theologically meaningful (Campbell 2021:118; Thomas & van den Berg 2021:89). While embodied presence remains central to sacramental life and pastoral intimacy, digital platforms have undeniably expanded accessibility, especially for urban congregants with structural or health-related limitations (Cloete 2015:4). This perspective is increasingly echoed within South African Pentecostal and mainline churches, where the challenge lies not in abandoning virtual forms but in cultivating digital worship that is participatory, relational, and spiritually formative. As Adogame (2021:152) argues, African churches must grapple with digital ecclesiology not as an abstract concern but as a pastoral and theological imperative in contemporary urban contexts. Therefore, the task is not merely technological adaptation but the cultivation of worship spaces—online and offline – that reflect the relational and incarnational core of Christian faith.

5. The healing touch in the age of homo-digitalis: An African context

The biblical account of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25–34) demonstrates the interplay of faith, physical connection, and divine power in healing. This narrative resonates across cultural and temporal contexts, including Africa, where the communal and spiritual dimensions of healing are deeply embedded in social and theological frameworks. Scholars such as Hays (2014:67) and Wright (2009:102–103) emphasise the relational and embodied aspects of healing in this account, which align closely with African perspectives on health, wellness, and spiritual connection.

In many African contexts, healing is not merely a medical intervention but a holistic process that encompasses physical, spiritual, and communal restoration (Mbiti 1990:119). The emphasis on relational presence and spiritual agency mirrors the narrative of Jesus and the woman, where her faith in His divine power and the act of touch brought comprehensive healing. African traditional healing practices, which often involve physical

touch, communal prayers, and faith in spiritual intercession, echo this biblical paradigm. These practices are rooted in the belief that health is deeply connected to one's relationship with the divine and the community (Gehman 1989:89).

The age of homo-digitalis, however, poses challenges to these traditional approaches, as physical presence and touch are increasingly replaced by digital interactions. In this context, the transformative power of faith, as exemplified by the woman's story, provides a theological framework for integrating faith-based healing with digital tools. Swinton (2012:45) highlights that faith transcends physical proximity and can manifest in various forms of relational connection, including those mediated by technology. This perspective opens the door for AI and other digital innovations to complement existing African healing practices. AI, for instance, could play a significant role in bridging gaps in healthcare access across the continent. By leveraging AI-driven tools for diagnostics, telemedicine, and spiritual support, communities can address physical and mental health needs even in remote areas. For example, virtual pastoral counselling and AI-driven prayer apps could provide spiritual comfort and guidance, particularly for those unable to access traditional healers or clergy. These tools could serve as extensions of faith communities, offering relational presence in a digital format (Lartey 2003:86).

However, it is important to consider the limitations of AI in an African context, where healing often requires physical and communal engagement. As Gehman (1989:112) notes, the communal aspect of African spirituality is integral to the healing process, as it fosters belonging, accountability, and support. AI cannot replicate the deep relational and spiritual bonds that are characteristic of African healing practices. Thus, while AI may facilitate access to healthcare and spiritual resources, it must be employed as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, the embodied and communal practices central to African traditions. Furthermore, the integration of AI in African healing practices must account for socio-economic disparities and digital divides. Many communities lack the technological and basic infrastructure or resources needed to fully benefit from AI-driven innovations. This underscores the need for culturally sensitive approaches that prioritise equitable access and respect for traditional practices.

Ultimately, the story of the woman who touched Jesus's garment offers a powerful theological foundation for understanding healing in an African context because it affirms that healing is not merely physical but deeply relational and faith-driven. The woman's healing was activated not just by touch, but by faith enacted through relational encounter, a principle that resonates strongly within African cosmologies of healing where physical presence, spiritual power, and communal support are inseparable. Just as the woman stepped into a public, faith-filled space to seek restoration, African healing frameworks recognise the communal dimension of wellness, the need for spiritual intercession, and the transformative potential of faith-in-action. As Wright (2009:116) affirms, faith is not confined to physical proximity, but can be mediated through diverse relational channels, including spiritual, communal, and potentially digital ones. This biblical narrative thus legitimises the holistic and relational healing paradigms found in African spirituality, while also inviting churches to creatively reimagine how these embodied principles can be expressed, even in mediated, digital spaces, without losing theological integrity.

6. Balancing innovation and tradition: AI as a support tool for pastoral ministry

In South Africa and globally, churches are cautiously but increasingly adopting AI to enhance their operations. For instance, some congregations have begun using AI-powered transcription tools (like Otter.ai) to generate sermon notes and summaries, while others use chatbots to handle pastoral queries and schedule appointments. Some churches in Europe and North America have experimented with AI-driven tools such as chatbots for spiritual questions, automated prayer responses, and personalised scripture delivery (Ministry Brands 2024). These applications signal growing interest in AI as a supplement to digital ministry, though many remain in early adoption phases. Globally, churches like Life Church in America use predictive analytics to tailor online content to members' spiritual needs, and AI-driven platforms such as Bible AI assist in contextual Bible study by interpreting scripture through natural language processing. Gonzalez (2020:48) documents how churches in the Global North are using predictive algorithms to customise online sermons, identify pastoral care needs through sentiment analysis, and even automate prayer responses.

In South Africa, the United Apostolic Faith Church in Johannesburg has experimented with AI-assisted platforms for tithing automation and digital engagement metrics. These innovations signal a growing trend to integrate AI as a support tool in ministry, not to replace pastoral presence, but to augment digital discipleship and operational efficiency.

However, this transformation raises critical questions: How can AI effectively assist pastors and faith communities without undermining the spiritual and relational essence of the church? AI is being leveraged to optimise administrative tasks, enhance outreach, and provide personalised spiritual support. In South Africa, faith organisations are exploring AI to manage membership data, streamline event planning, and improve communication with congregants. For example, AI-driven analytics are being employed to understand congregational needs and develop targeted community programs (Adventist News Network 2024:15). Globally, innovative tools like *Esperanza*, an AI-powered virtual Bible instructor used by the Adventist Church, are providing real-time answers and facilitating personalised Bible studies via platforms like WhatsApp. Such applications help pastors extend their reach while focusing their personal energy on counselling and preaching (Adventist News Network 2024:8). Similarly, Switzerland's experiment with an AI-powered "Jesus" chatbot to answer questions on faith demonstrates the potential for AI in interactive spiritual engagement (Rowohlt 2024:23).

AI helps churches maintain their mission of connecting people by fostering digital evangelism. Interactive platforms and virtual reality tools are being developed to engage younger audiences unfamiliar with traditional church environments (Adventist News Network 2024:16). For example, digital spaces like the metaverse are offering congregants new ways to experience worship and fellowship, helping churches maintain relevance in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape. As artificial intelligence becomes more prevalent across sectors, its implications for the church, particularly in Charismatic and Pentecostal contexts, remain both promising and controversial. Conversations with pastors and parishioners have revealed diverse perspectives, ranging from cautious optimism to theological reservations. While AI has the potential to assist in certain aspects of ministry, its integration raises profound questions about the source of

inspiration, the sanctity of pastoral work, and the role of human agency in spiritual matters (Masweneng 2023:5).

Documented reflections from the Ecumenical Leadership Council of South Africa's AI Workshop for Church Leaders (2024) indicate that some pastors see AI as a helpful starting point in sermon preparation.² One pastor remarked, "AI should not write your sermons, but it can help you start." This reflects a growing pastoral interest in AI as a supportive, not substitutive, resource in theological reflection and ministry planning. Tools like ChatGPT and Logos Bible Software assist in organising scriptural references, outlining themes, and providing historical and cultural context. However, many stress that the core of sermon preparation must remain inspired by the Holy Spirit. A recurring concern is that AI may undermine human reasoning and creativity. Critics argue that AI could encourage intellectual passivity, with people outsourcing critical thinking to machines. "AI is taking away the ability of people's thinking and logic—that's not a good sign. GOD gave us a brain to be used," a parishioner commented during a public feedback session at the Ecumenical Leadership Council of South Africa AI Workshop for Church Leaders (2024).² This critique ties into broader concerns about transhumanism, the idea of improving humanity through technological means, which some see as a challenge to the belief that humans are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). Despite reservations, some argue that AI can serve a purpose within the framework of faith. One pastor compared AI to traditional resources, saying, "The Holy Spirit is teaching us by what we read. We all need to study the Bible, but commentaries help us, theological books help us, and these tools equip us to honour God". This view positions AI as a modern extension of tools that support faith, similar to how theological commentaries or Bible study platforms have long aided pastors. While AI may streamline operations and enhance ministry, true pastoral work requires spiritual depth, which AI cannot replicate.

2 See minutes from the AI Workshop for Church Leaders, hosted by the Ecumenical Leadership Council of South Africa, 16 October 2024. Available: <https://www.elc.org.za>.

The integration of AI into ministry invites a delicate balance between innovation and tradition. While it can assist in logistical tasks and enhance evangelistic outreach, it must not replace the relational and spiritual essence of church work. AI may provide information and tools, but true ministry requires a heart shaped by Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

Faithful preaching requires more than spiritual passion; it demands disciplined theological reflection and diligent preparation. As Paul exhorts in 2 Timothy 2:15, ministers must “present [themselves] to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” John Stott affirms this in *Between Two Worlds*, stating that preaching is “bridge-building between the biblical world and the contemporary world” and must be rooted in careful exegesis and study (Stott 1982:137). Thus, before a preacher proclaims the Word, they must first be deeply formed by it – intellectually, spiritually, and ethically.

Conclusion

The interplay of theology and technology, particularly in the age of homodigitalis such as artificial intelligence, reveals both profound opportunities and significant challenges for the church. As AI reshapes various aspects of life, including ministry, it underscores the importance of balancing innovation with tradition. While AI can enhance efficiency, facilitate outreach, and complement pastoral work, its limitations in relationality and spirituality emphasise the irreplaceable role of human agency and divine inspiration. The biblical narrative of healing and faith, as seen in the woman who touched Jesus’s garment, offers a guiding framework for integrating technological advancements without losing the essence of relational connection and spiritual depth. In an era defined by digital interactions, the church is called to steward these tools responsibly, ensuring that they support human flourishing while preserving the dignity and relational essence central to the *imago Dei*. Through careful discernment, technology can serve as an instrument for ministry, fostering both innovation and faithfulness in an evolving world.

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