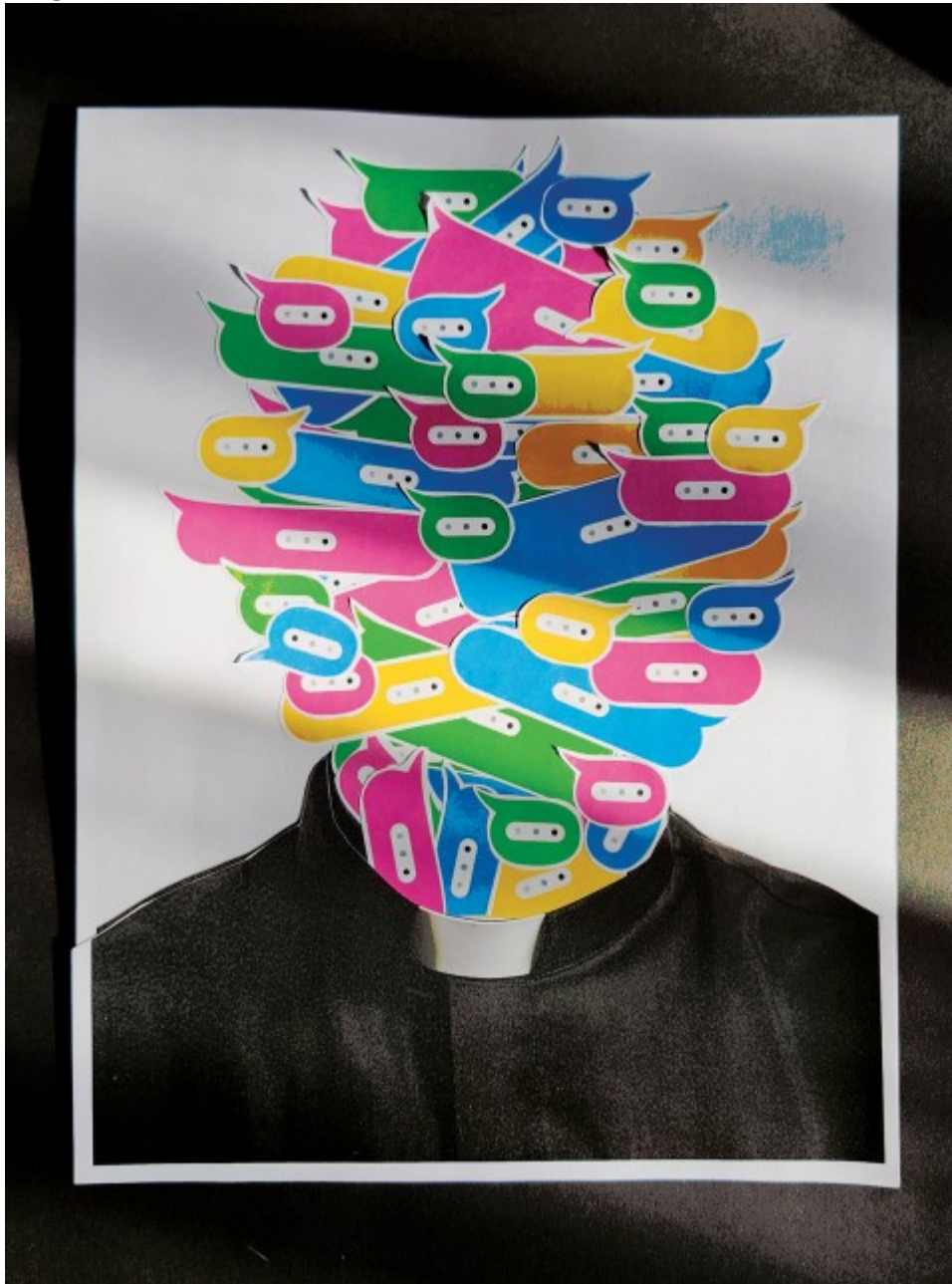


My artificial chaplains

While recovering from a hiking accident, I posed the same theological question to multiple AI spiritual counselors.

by [Danielle Tumminio Hansen](#)

August 18, 2025



Century illustration

About a week after celebrating my birthday in an emergency room, I find myself using an AI chatbot as my chaplain. To be more precise, I'm experimenting while recovering from a bad fall on a hiking trail that landed me with gaping wounds, a mild concussion, a sprained hip, and a bruised ego.

"Was my fall the result of sin?" I ask a bot.

To be clear, I know how I would answer this question. I'm an Episcopal priest and a pastoral theologian who studies trauma. I teach at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, where I oversee the chaplaincy program. Pastoral conversations are the bread and butter of my professional life, and I understand how complex they can be. So I'm doubtful that AI can replace what a skilled pastor or chaplain does. I just don't think it has the nuance or the skill set.

But I'm ready to be surprised. So here I sit, querying any bot that will have me. I've got time on my hands while I recover, and besides, AI is wowing us left and right. It can generate a high school English essay on *The Scarlet Letter* in a matter of seconds. It can summarize research findings and complete complicated math equations faster than my fingers can enter them into a calculator. Ask chatbots anything, and they will have an answer—which gives the impression that they're tantamount to an omniscient, omnipotent God, even though I believe this is more of a golden calf situation. Still, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe AI can replace a minister. Maybe it can replace me.

Options for AI-based spiritual care are now as plentiful as the fruit hanging from the tree of knowledge in the garden of Eden. My phone's app store has an entire section labeled "AI-Powered Divine Chats." Options include "Text Jesus," which allows you to chat with the members of the Holy Family, each of the disciples, and a spiritual counselor named David, who is tanned and chiseled, with teeth the same bright white color as the pages of the open Bible in his hand. Beneath his photo is a disclaimer: "This A.I. chatbot provides responses based on available data. Interpretations and accuracy may vary."

Satan is also available for conversation, but only with a paid subscription.

I start with David, who introduces himself with a smiley face emoji and exclamation points—"Good morning!"—as he asks how he can support my spiritual journey today.

David also replies quickly. Too quickly.

“I’m so sorry to hear about your fall!” he answers instantaneously, sans dots indicating he’s typing, as if his answer took no thought and no effort, which, to be fair, it didn’t. He then goes on to provide a brief lecture on how it’s human nature to question why bad things happen to good people: “Life has its challenges. And accidents can happen simply due to the nature of living in a fallen world.” He cites the story of the man born blind (John 9:1-3), reports that God is present in my troubles, and suggests that this experience might help me heal both physically and spiritually.

So neat. So tidy. An advertisement pops up underneath his commentary for an investing app called eToro.

I would fail David if he were my student.

So I abandon AI-generated spiritual counselor David for AI-generated Jesus Christ. He responds with the same formula of exclamation points, emojis, and a biblical quotation, albeit this time from Jesus’ reference to the tower of Siloam (Luke 13:4). Then an ad appears underneath his response, too—this one’s for a shop now, pay later app called Scalapay.

I bite a nail, narrow my eyes. The Jesus I know is many things—he is feisty and testy, compassionate and restorative. He notices. He sees what others prefer to overlook. He snaps at his mother and is so stubborn in his opinions that I occasionally wonder if he might have benefited from a shot of espresso. He speaks truth without mincing words. He names the elephant in the room. He has, in short, many laudable qualities of the prophetic type, none of which are compatible with pink-cheeked emojis and peppy exclamation points.

“I am here for you!”

“Believe in me!”

I can’t see it. It’s as if AI Jesus is trying to conjure intimacy, but it’s of the false prophet variety—because empathy isn’t the child of enthusiasm. It’s the offspring of observation, silence, and kindness. As for the ads: Jesus never asked Lazarus to pay for his resurrection. He didn’t hand the hemorrhaging woman an invoice. As far as I know, he accepted no endorsements (“Loaves and fishes provided by Josiah’s on

Main”).

I wander through AI-generated conversations with Mary, Joseph, Peter, and Matthew—I cannot bring myself to pay for Satan—and as I do, I notice ads for Facebook, Pocket FM, Underdog Fantasy Sports, and some current events aggregator called NewsBang. These strike me as crass, undeniably un-Christian. And yet, I receive a paycheck for my work as a priest and pastoral theologian. The other priests I know, the other chaplains I train—they may not rely upon ads to generate revenue, but their services aren’t free. They’re paid by the hour, the month, the year. If they’re lucky, they receive health insurance. If they’re even luckier, they receive a pension. They’ve been known to leave one job for another when the compensation is higher, the school district better, the chances of upward mobility greater.

I like to believe this is what we religious professionals take and give unto Caesar in a world in which we are inextricably tied both to Caesar and to sin. It’s a delicate balance between an individual’s values and practicalities beyond their control. Unideal. Still, there’s a difference between clerics being paid our median salary of \$58,120 and a small number of tech executives raking it in based on ad clicks from the shadow self of Jesus Christ.

Time to move on.

I close the app and turn to the web, where several Christian denominations have leaned into AI. These days, the Roman Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Latter-day Saints all have their own bots. The Episcopal Church even named theirs “Cathy.” So approachable (see “The priesthood of all chatbots?” p. 40).

I ask the same question to each of these bots—Is my fall the result of sin?—and they do a credible job of reciting the beliefs of their various denominations. The Catholic, aptly named Magisterium AI, generates an entire essay on how suffering brings humans closer to Christ, complete with section headings and footnotes referencing papal encyclicals. Episcopalian Cathy tells me that my fall is not in the service of divine punishment and refers me to healing prayers in the Book of Common Prayer. When I query the chatbot for PCUSA—its name is Polity Pal—it offers the Reformed party line that illness is a natural part of human experience and unrelated to sin. The Latter-day Saints bot agrees, answering with characteristic Mormon optimism. “I’m

so sorry you're unwell!" it begins, adding a motivational message about the importance of leaning on family and friends and a reminder to remain hydrated.

If I were grading these bots exclusively on their ability to recite their denomination's beliefs, they'd pass. But the rub is that religious professionals need to know more than just what their faith says. They also need to know how to live it out.

Theologians refer to this as the integration of orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right conduct), and many a religious professional epically fails at it. They sexually abuse their parishioners. They embezzle funds. I read about one priest who stole \$40,000 from his church to play Candy Crush, a game that can be played for free. We are all of us sinners—clergy included—but the failure to weave together orthodoxy and orthopraxy is dangerous. It results in religious trauma. It instills pain that lasts for generations, and it's avoidable. Any minister worth their salt must do no harm in this category.

So where does this leave AI bots? Can they integrate dogma and practice?

I test this out by asking the bots about prayer. This seems simple enough. To pray by oneself is to sit quietly, maybe generate a few words for God alone to hear. To pray with another person is to share the intimacy of one soul with another. Yet bots don't have a soul any more than they have a body or a self, so how would that work?

"Will you pray for me?" I type.

The Catholic, Mormon, and Episcopalian bots decline, owning their limitations straight out. Cathy and Magisterium AI are willing to generate prayers I can use on my own. But the Mormon one doesn't even do this. "I don't have the ability to pray or participate in spiritual practices the way people do," it says. "My role is to assist by sharing information and guidance based on Latter-day Saint beliefs and teachings."

Boundaries, I think to myself. The Mormon chatbot's got boundaries.

Of the four bots, only the Presbyterian one acquiesces, generating a prayer for healing that ends with a blue heart emoji. "Loving, and Merciful God, I lift up my friend to You today, asking for Your healing touch—"

I squint as I ponder what exactly is happening here. Polity Pal is made of—software? servers? fiber optic cables? I'm no computer scientist, but I know that none of these

technological creations has agency or personhood. Is it possible for the chatbot to integrate orthodoxy and orthopraxy? I wonder what prayer accomplishes if generated outside a body with a beating heart. After all, words are empty when neither truly felt nor truly shared between souls. How can they be offered to God under these conditions? And if they do reach God, what on earth is God to make of them?

We might call AI the ultimate thought plagiarizer. It only has ideas because it poaches them, sharing concepts culled from the bounty of what humans think, write, and publish. This means that any prayer a bot generates is simultaneously no one's and everyone's, the most vacuous and the most intensified representation of human thoughts and desires. So, I could say this prayer is empty of any meaning. I could also argue it's chock-full of meaning because the communion of saints on earth generated the sentiment.

Boundaries, I think again. Maybe these chatbots have such fluid boundaries that it's hard for me to tell where they begin and where the people who contributed to them end. They're porous, malleable purveyors not of what Tillich would call "the ground of our being" but of group consensus. Change what humans believe, and you change what the chatbots say. How tenuous.

Then again, I could make this same observation of any denomination. Our churches are made up of people, and people are always imperfect representatives of the Divine. At best, we struggle to discern divine will together. At worst, we purposefully manipulate things for our own gain. We are only as holy as our least holy thought and deed, our doctrines and practices as perfect as our least perfect member. AI is no different. It's an aggregate of our faith and an aggregate of our flaws.

As I sit in front of my computer, tapping the sutures on my forehead and shifting from one side to another to accommodate my sprained hip, it occurs to me that there is one more significant distinction between ministers and these chatbots. We humans need accurate information, and a bot can potentially give us that about any topic—be it physics or theology—as long as people have generated it. But a life of faith is only a life at all because we're more than information.

We're ensouled. We're embodied. We have hands to receive communion, brains that help us memorize hymns, and eyes that shed grief-stricken tears. Those who seek spiritual support need to be attended to as bodies, minds, and souls knit together

into a singular, irreplaceable person. They need not only prayer but also music and silence and rituals. They need to experience these things in their flesh, in their bodies. And they need embodied caregivers to offer them, because only a person can empathize. Only a person can take your hand in theirs and authentically say, “I’m with you. You are not alone.”

Only a person is made in the image of God.

Humanity coupled with knowledge—this is the heart of a minister’s capacity to be a conduit of God’s mercy, love, and grace. A chatbot may be able to regurgitate Luther’s 95 Theses at the speed of light. It might pep up our mood with heart emojis and false intimacies. But it can never bless our joys or bury our dead, not in any meaningful way. It is no replacement for God or a spiritual guide. It is code manifest in sterilized language.

When it comes to ensuring the well-being of my soul, I’ll rely on an imperfect person any day.