The Church of Scotland

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI):

Opportunity and Challenge for the Church: Facilitator's Notes

Session 4 – Theology and AI

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Background Reading: Artificial Intelligence Report (churchofscotland.org.uk) Introduction (Page 7 - 10)

Discussion:

This process is simply to stimulate discussion about the opportunities and challenges that artificial intelligence brings to all our lives. It's not directed to a conclusion. Instead, its objective is to help us ask questions about something that shapes all of our lives and our thinking.

Play the video: Session 4 - AI in our Church
Read the Bible passage
1 Timothy 6:11-19

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Read the following paragraph:

There is no doubt that AI is here to stay and it may develop in ways which we can only hesitantly sketch at present, one day robots may possibly have some form of feelings or understanding. It will bring great benefit, but there may also be huge costs or potentially destructive forms of AI with which humanity will need to grapple. For the Church, we must ask where AI is within the bigger narrative of redemption and reconciliation for Creation and relationships, and of its role in the building of the Kingdom of God. Should this be of concern to theologians, or to ministers and members of congregations also?

Begin by asking each participant, individually or in small groups, to answer the following questions:

1. Are any forms of AI used already in your congregation?
2. What new ways can you envisage AI could be used for worship and mission in the future, when we know robots and chatbots can plausibly mimic humans?

Read the following paragraph:

Many churches made use of social media to connect with their congregation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The New York Times recently reported that Facebook, part of the Social Technology Company **Meta**, is developing new products aimed at faith communities, with the aim of becoming a virtual home for religious community.

The following article gives more information about this:

Facebook's Next Target: The Religious Experience. Published 25 July 2021, New York Times website

Ask the following question:

3. a) What benefits do you think there might be in engaging with these new types of church services?
   b) Can you think of any moral and ethical questions that this might raise? E.g. data privacy, targeted advertising.

Read the following paragraph:

While robots and chatbots lack inherent spirituality – something that we find in person-to-person contacts or in the relationship between a person and God – and will not replace carers or therapists, they may yet have a beneficial

place in helping people to explore their own spirituality in situations where interpersonal contact is difficult. This may be the case in bereavement counselling in areas where no individuals have the necessary training, for instance. Thus, there are real opportunities for the Church boldly to explore the use of AI technologies in areas such as pastoral work, counselling, worship, and mission.

There is even a Gospel song that has been fully created and sung by a robot singer!

You can read more about that in this article:

First gospel song created by a robot singer, by Kelly Valencia. Published 10 November 2021, Premier Christian Radio website.

Ask the following questions:

4. Could you envisage a time when your minister or mission worker was a robot or chatbot?
5. How does this challenge us to reflect on what it means to be a person made in the image of God?

Reflections

What the development of AI may demand of us is that we take more cognizance of what it might mean to be made in the image of the Creator, the one who brings into being new forms of life from the dust (and silicon) of the earth and how that shapes our responsibility to AI and those who will be affected by AI.

An AI that develops its own sense of identity, within a Christian theology of creation, becomes a new creation within God's creation, whether artificially, naturally or supernaturally formed.

An AI that is able to mimic human responses will not suffer or feel pain, nor know the personal cost in terms of relational damage and shame, of actions that it may cause which do harm to others.

Seeing our interactions with technology and our involvement in the development of AI through a relational lens such as that of the Trinity may help us to engage productively with these developments, so that we can help shape AI that God would declare to be good. The world and Creation are not static. Developments such as AI will always arise as humanity deploys its inherent creativity. A sign of the Church's maturity is how it responds, engages with and tries to assist communities in how they move forward with AI as part of their lives.

Prayer

God in whose image we are formed,
we rejoice to be a part of your creation,
and for the calling we receive
to serve that creation.
Give us a humility of spirit to recognise
the limitations of our own understanding
and the openness to acknowledge
that your creation is a work in progress.
May those who work on artificial intelligence
remember their responsibilities:
not just to humanity,
but potentially also to those intelligent beings
created through their work.
May we all think carefully about the nature of life,
of intelligence,
and of our place within a universe
that enables such extraordinary complexity to arise.
Amen.

Exploring further:

You may want to listen to the recent Reith Lectures by Stuart Russell: *Living with Artificial Intelligence* on BBC4 iPlayer

1. The Biggest Event in Human History
2. AI in warfare
3. AI in the Economy
4. AI: A future for Humans