



FREE GUIDE · AI AND EMERGING TECH

AI Starter Guide for Church Leaders

A practical introduction to AI for church leaders with 10 real tasks, tool comparisons and data safety guidance.

We try hard to get everything here right, and every guide and template shows when it was last reviewed. But they are free, they are general and things change: the law, prices and the tools themselves. We cannot guarantee they are complete, current or right for your church, so check anything you rely on and take professional advice where a decision matters.

AI Starter Guide for Church Leaders

Who this is for: the minister or church leader who has been asked about AI by the leadership team and wants a plain, practical answer before deciding what to do.

What Is AI, Actually?

You have probably heard a lot about artificial intelligence. Some of it sounds exciting, some of it sounds terrifying and quite a lot of it sounds like hype. So let us start with what AI actually is in plain, practical terms.

AI is software that can read, write, summarise and suggest things based on patterns it has learnt from enormous amounts of text. The tools you will hear about most – ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot – are called "large language models." Think of them as extremely well-read assistants who can draft, edit, brainstorm and organise text for you.

What AI is not:

- It is not sentient or conscious
- It does not "know" things the way a person does – it predicts what words should come next
- It is not infallible – it can confidently produce wrong answers (sometimes called "hallucinations")
- It is not a replacement for human judgement, pastoral wisdom or theological discernment

What AI is good at:

- Drafting and editing text quickly
- Summarising long documents
- Brainstorming ideas when you are stuck
- Handling repetitive administrative writing
- Helping you think through structure and plans

The key mindset: AI is a capable first-draft assistant. You always review, edit and take responsibility for the final output.

10 Practical Things You Can Do with AI Today

You do not need to be technical. If you can type a message, you can use these tools. Here are ten genuinely useful tasks for church life.

1. Sermon Preparation

- ☐ Explore a Bible passage from multiple angles
- ☐ Generate sermon outlines based on a theme or lectionary reading

- ☐ Find contemporary illustrations for biblical themes
- ☐ Check your draft sermon for clarity and length

Example prompt: *"I'm preaching on Luke 15:1–10 this Sunday. Our congregation is mostly older adults in a rural village. Can you help me outline a 12-minute sermon that connects the parable of the lost sheep to everyday experiences of searching for something precious?"*

2. Church Administration

- ☐ Draft agendas for church council or leadership team meetings
- ☐ Write minutes from your handwritten notes
- ☐ Create volunteer rota templates
- ☐ Draft policies (health and safety, hiring, room hire). ⚠️ Not safeguarding – see "5 Things You Should Not Use AI For" below

Example prompt: *"Here are my rough notes from last night's leadership meeting. Can you turn these into formal minutes with action points, named owners and dates?"*

3. Communications

- ☐ Write notice sheet notices in a warm, inviting tone
- ☐ Draft emails to congregation members
- ☐ Create welcome pack text for newcomers
- ☐ Write website copy for your church pages

Example prompt: *"We're launching a new toddler group on Tuesday mornings. Can you write a short, friendly notice for the notice sheet and a slightly longer version for our website? The group is called Little Fishes."*

4. Social Media Content

- ☐ Generate post ideas for the week ahead
- ☐ Write captions for photos of church events
- ☐ Create a content calendar for Advent, Lent or Harvest
- ☐ Adapt one piece of content for different platforms

Example prompt: *"Can you write five Facebook posts for our church this week? We have: a Sunday service, a Wednesday coffee morning, a food bank collection on Friday, and we'd like one reflective post and one community-focused post."*

5. Meeting Minutes and Summaries

- ☐ Turn rough notes into structured minutes
- ☐ Summarise lengthy reports or denominational documents

- ☐ Extract action points from rambling discussions
- ☐ Create follow-up emails after meetings

Example prompt: *"Here's a 20-page report from our denomination about a new giving scheme. Can you summarise the key points in 500 words, focusing on what our leadership team needs to decide?"*

6. Newsletters

- ☐ Draft monthly or weekly church newsletters
- ☐ Suggest engaging subject lines for email newsletters
- ☐ Rewrite dry announcements in a warmer tone
- ☐ Create seasonal newsletter templates

Example prompt: *"Can you draft our April church newsletter? Include: Easter service times (Maundy Thursday 7pm, Good Friday 2pm, Easter Sunday 10am), a thank-you to the flower team, a call for volunteers for the spring clean on 12 April and a reflection on new beginnings."*

7. Grant Applications and Funding Bids

- ☐ Draft narratives for heritage lottery and other grant funders

If you were counting on the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme

It **closed on 31 March 2026**, and from 1 April 2026 VAT on repairs to listed places of worship applies in full unless further relief is introduced.

Its replacement is the **Places of Worship Renewal Fund** - £92 million over four years, delivered by Historic England, **England only**, with grants between £10,000 and £1 million. The difference matters: the old scheme was a VAT reclaim that any eligible church could use, the new one is a **competitive grant** expected to support roughly 100 to 150 places of worship a year. Budget on that basis rather than assuming the money is still there.

- ☐ Write community impact statements
- ☐ Structure a funding application to match the funder's criteria
- ☐ Proofread and tighten existing drafts

Example prompt: *"We're applying to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for roof repairs to our Grade II listed church. The total project cost is £180,000. Can you help me draft the 'statement of significance' section? Here are the key facts about our building..."**

8. Volunteer Coordination

- ☐ Draft volunteer role descriptions for specific tasks

- ☐ Create rota templates and scheduling plans
- ☐ Write recruitment notices for the noticeboard, newsletter or website
- ☐ Compose thank-you messages for volunteers

Example prompt: *"We need to recruit two more volunteers for our weekly coffee morning. Can you draft a friendly notice for our church newsletter that explains the role, the time commitment (one morning a month, 9:30–12:30) and what's involved? Keep it warm and encouraging – we want people to feel it's manageable, not a big commitment."*

9. Website and Blog Content

- ☐ Write or refresh page copy for your church website (About Us, What to Expect, Contact)
- ☐ Draft blog posts about church events, community stories or seasonal reflections
- ☐ Create meta descriptions and page titles for better search visibility
- ☐ Update event listings with clear, welcoming descriptions

Example prompt: *"Our church website's 'About Us' page hasn't been updated in years. Can you help me rewrite it? We're a small community church in a market town, about 50 regular attenders, mix of ages. We're known for our coffee morning, toddler group and community garden. Keep it welcoming and jargon-free – written for someone who has never been to church before."*

10. Event Planning

- ☐ Create detailed event plans with timelines
- ☐ Draft promotional materials for church fairs, concerts or community events
- ☐ Generate checklists for recurring events (Harvest Supper, Christmas Fair)
- ☐ Write risk assessments for church activities

Example prompt: *"We're planning a Jubilee community lunch for 80 people in our church hall. Can you create a planning checklist covering food, logistics, volunteers needed, health and safety, and a timeline for the day itself?"*

5 Things You Should Not Use AI For

AI is a tool, not an oracle. There are places where it should not be trusted and situations where using it would be inappropriate or risky.

1. Safeguarding Decisions

Never use AI to assess whether a safeguarding concern is serious, decide whether to report something or determine the appropriate response to a disclosure. Safeguarding decisions must

follow your denomination's procedures and involve trained safeguarding officers. Lives depend on getting this right.

We do not publish safeguarding guidance and nothing here is a substitute for it. Your denomination's policy takes precedence over anything on this site. For independent advice, [thirtyone:eight](#) runs a helpline for churches on **0303 003 1111**; the **NSPCC Helpline** is **0808 800 5000**. Allegations against an adult working with children go to your **local authority LADO**. If a child or adult is at immediate risk, call **999**.

2. Replacing Pastoral Care

AI can help you draft a letter, but it cannot replace the ministry of presence. Do not use AI chatbots as substitutes for pastoral conversations, bereavement support or spiritual direction. People in crisis need a real human being, not a language model.

3. Generating Theology Unsupervised

AI can help you explore theological ideas, but it does not understand theology. It can produce plausible-sounding but doctrinally questionable content. Always apply your own theological judgement and training. Never preach or publish AI-generated theological content without careful review.

4. Processing Personal Data in Free Tools

Free versions of AI tools may use your input to train their models. Do not paste personal information about congregation members, safeguarding concerns, pastoral notes or any identifiable data into free AI tools. This is a GDPR issue as well as a pastoral one. See the data safety section below.

5. Pretending AI Content Is Entirely Human-Written

Be honest about your use of AI. If you have used AI to help draft a sermon, a report or a newsletter, you do not need to announce it from the pulpit, but do not actively pretend otherwise if asked. Authenticity matters in ministry.

Choosing Your First Tool

There are several AI tools available. Here is a brief, honest comparison to help you choose. All prices were checked on 26 August 2026 and are in GBP. They move, so confirm before budgeting.

Feature	ChatGPT (OpenAI)	Claude (Anthropic)	Gemini (Google)	Copilot (Microsoft)
Free version	Yes (current free model, changes often)	Yes (limited)	Yes	Yes (Copilot app; Copilot Chat included with Microsoft 365)

Feature	ChatGPT (OpenAI)	Claude (Anthropic)	Gemini (Google)	Copilot (Microsoft)
Paid version	Plus: ~£20/month	Pro: ~£20/month	Google AI Pro: ~£19/month	Paid add-on to Microsoft 365
Best for	All-round use, very popular	Careful, nuanced writing	Integration with Google Workspace	If you already use Microsoft 365
Data handling (free)	May train on your input	May train on your input	May train on your input	May train on your input
Data handling (paid)	⚠ May still train - see below	⚠ May still train - see below	⚠ May still train - see below	Business tiers excluded
UK data storage	Servers primarily US/EU	Servers primarily US	Servers primarily US/EU	EU Data Boundary via M365 (UK residency is a paid add-on)
Ease of use	Very easy	Very easy	Very easy	Integrated into existing tools

My recommendation for getting started: Try the free version of any of these. If you find it useful and start using it regularly, upgrade to a paid plan for better performance and higher limits. Paying does not make it private: see "Do not assume paid means private" below.

Data Safety Basics

This is the most important section of this guide. AI tools are powerful, but you need to handle data responsibly.

What Not to Paste into AI Tools

Never enter the following into any AI tool, especially free versions:

- ☐ Names and personal details of congregation members
- ☐ Safeguarding concerns or disclosures
- ☐ Pastoral notes or counselling records
- ☐ Financial details of individuals (Gift Aid records, donation amounts)
- ☐ Medical or health information about anyone
- ☐ Passwords, login credentials or account numbers
- ☐ Details from confidential church council or trustee discussions

Free vs Paid Data Policies

Free tools often include terms allowing the provider to use your input to improve their models. This means text you enter may be stored, reviewed and used in training. This is not appropriate for any personal or sensitive data.

Do not assume paid means private. The no-training commitments generally sit on the **business, education and API** tiers – not the personal paid subscriptions most people buy. Anthropic, for example, trains on consumer Claude conversations – Free, Pro and Max – where the setting is on, under terms published on 28 August 2025 with a decision deadline of 8 October 2025, with retention of up to five years. ⚠️ **You can opt out**, and opting out returns you to 30-day retention with no training use, so check the privacy setting before concluding you need to spend anything. If your church wants a guarantee in writing rather than a setting, the business tiers are the place to look, and check the terms yourself; if you can't, treat every AI tool as a public place and never type anything into it you wouldn't put on a noticeboard.

Provider policies change faster than any guide can track. Every claim in the table above was accurate when this guide was last reviewed, and the honest advice is to verify the one you're about to rely on before you rely on it.

Practical Tips

- ☐ Use AI for generic tasks (drafting, brainstorming, editing) rather than tasks involving personal data
- ☐ If you need to reference a real situation, anonymise it completely first
- ☐ Check the privacy policy of any tool before you start using it
- ☐ Consider creating a simple AI usage policy for your church – even a few sentences recorded in your leadership team's minutes

Getting Started: Your 15-Minute First Session

Set aside 15 minutes, make a cup of tea and try this.

Minutes 1–3: Sign Up

1. Go to one of these sites:
 - ChatGPT: chat.openai.com
 - Claude: claude.ai
 - Gemini: gemini.google.com
2. Create a free account using your email address
3. You will see a text box where you can type a message

Minutes 3–8: Your First Prompt

Type this (or adapt it for your church):

"I'm a church leader at a small church in a rural village. We have about 40 regular Sunday attendees, mostly aged 60+. Can you suggest five ways we could use our church noticeboard more effectively to connect with the wider village community?"

Read the response. Notice how specific and practical the suggestions are. If you want to refine them, just type a follow-up:

"Those are helpful. Can you focus on idea number 3 and give me more detail? Also, we don't have a budget for printing, so everything needs to be handwritten or very simply printed."

Minutes 8–13: Try Something Real

Now try something you actually need to do this week. Some ideas:

- Draft next Sunday's notice sheet notices
- Summarise a document you have been putting off reading
- Plan the agenda for your next leadership meeting
- Write a thank-you message to your volunteers

Minutes 13–15: Reflect

- ☐ Did it save you time?
- ☐ Was the output good enough to use (with editing)?
- ☐ What else could you use this for?
- ☐ Are there any data safety concerns with what you tried?

That is it. You have started. It really is that simple.

Where to Go Next

You do not have to figure this out alone.

- **Wired for Good** – our free newsletter with practical AI and digital tips for church leaders. Subscribe at churchdigitalstrategy.com
- **Church Digital Strategy resources** – guides, checklists and tools at churchdigitalstrategy.com

If you found this guide helpful, share it with a colleague. Most church leaders are curious about AI but do not know where to start. You can be the person who helps them take that first step.

Sources

Figures in this guide were checked against the pages below on 3 September 2026. Prices and product names change; the date at the top of the guide says when they were last confirmed. Claims that rest on pages we could not reach at the time of checking are not listed.

- **Claude pricing:** [Claude Pricing](#). Confirms a free Claude plan and Claude Pro at \$20 a month billed monthly.
- **Anthropic consumer terms:** [Updates to Consumer Terms and Privacy Policy](#). Confirms training on Free, Pro and Max conversations when the setting is on, and 30-day retention with no training use if you decline.
- **Anthropic data retention:** [How long do you store my data?](#). Confirms retention of up to five years where conversations are used for training.
- **Google AI plans:** [Google AI Pro and Ultra](#). Confirms a free Gemini tier at £0 and Google AI Pro at £18.99 a month.
- **Gemini data use:** [Gemini Apps Privacy Hub](#). Confirms Google uses Gemini activity to train generative AI models, human review of a subset of chats, three-year retention of reviewed chats and how to turn the setting off.
- **Microsoft Copilot data handling:** [Data, Privacy, and Security for Microsoft Copilot](#). Confirms commercial Copilot prompts and responses are not used to train foundation models, and the EU Data Boundary commitment.
- **Microsoft Copilot licensing:** [License Options for Microsoft Copilot](#). Confirms Copilot is an add-on to a Microsoft 365 subscription, and that Copilot Chat is included at no extra cost.
- **OpenAI API data controls:** [Data controls in the OpenAI platform](#). Confirms API data is not used for training unless you opt in.
- **Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme closure:** [The Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme \(LPWGS\) is closed](#). Confirms the scheme has closed, and the successor fund at £92 million over four years, delivered by Historic England, England only.
- **Places of Worship Renewal Fund grant sizes:** [Places of Worship Renewal Fund](#). Confirms grants from £10,000 to £1,000,000, England only, by expression of interest.
- **The scheme the fund replaced:** [£23 million government package to support restoration of thousands of listed places of worship](#). Confirms the old scheme was a VAT grant, ran to the end of March 2026 and was capped at £25,000.
- **VAT on listed buildings:** [Buildings and construction \(VAT Notice 708\)](#). Confirms the 20% rate on listed-building work since 1 October 2012.
- **Safeguarding helpline:** [thirtyone:eight](#). Confirms the safeguarding helpline number 0303 003 1111.
- **Personal data, statutory definition:** [Data Protection Act 2018, section 3](#). Confirms what counts as personal data.

- **UK GDPR principles:** [UK GDPR, Article 5](#). Confirms the principles that govern putting personal data into any tool.