



Algorithm over Altar?

How AI Might Be Rewriting Administrative,
Communicative and Spiritual Practice

Prof. Dr Holger Sievert, Rome, 11 June 2026

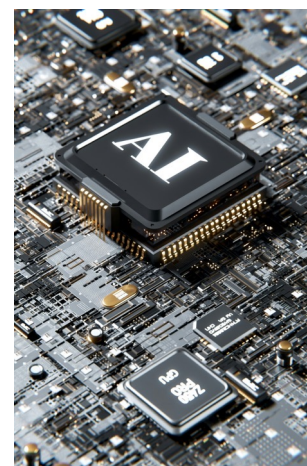
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AI has arrived in churches and demands strategic and ethical responses
– empirical data can help to get a better understanding of the current situation

- Artificial intelligence is becoming **increasingly important** in all areas of society, including the **church**. This keynote presents new and exclusive findings from a survey of **more than 7,000 church members and church staff** in Germany.
- The study explored, among others, how **AI is currently being used**, for which **specific purposes** it is applied, and what **role** it plays within **church organisations**. Participants were also asked about **barriers to AI adoption and implementation**.
- In addition, the survey examined **ethical attitudes towards AI**, both in general and within the church context. Special attention was given to the question of whether AI could be used in areas such as psychological counselling and **pastoral care**.
- Based on these findings, this keynote will discuss **key implications for churches** and outline broader challenges and opportunities for society as a whole, also referring to the recent encyclical „**Magnifica Humanitas**“ of Pope Leo XIV.



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Let us briefly recall what Leo XIV said recently about AI

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Key Messages of Pope Leo XIV on Artificial Intelligence (2026)



- **Human dignity** must remain at the **centre of all AI development** and deployment. Artificial intelligence **should support humanity and strengthen human capabilities** rather than replace human moral responsibility. **Accountability** for decisions must remain **with people**.
- Particular caution is required when AI is used in areas involving human life and safety. Decisions **concerning life and death must never be delegated** to autonomous AI systems. Strong **ethical standards** and clear **legal regulations** are essential to ensure responsible use.
- Greater **transparency** and stronger **public oversight** of powerful technology companies are also needed. Many social media algorithms prioritise engagement over truth and constructive dialogue. As a result, AI-driven systems **can contribute to misinformation** and social polarisation.
- Technological innovation should **serve the common good** rather than concentrate economic power. The impact of new technologies should always be assessed **in relation to human welfare**, social justice, and the broader interests of society.

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But what do empirical findings show on the subject of AI and the Church?

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Answers are partly provided by the study "Digitalisation in the Church Sector" (DiRK 2026), which has received considerable media attention in Germany

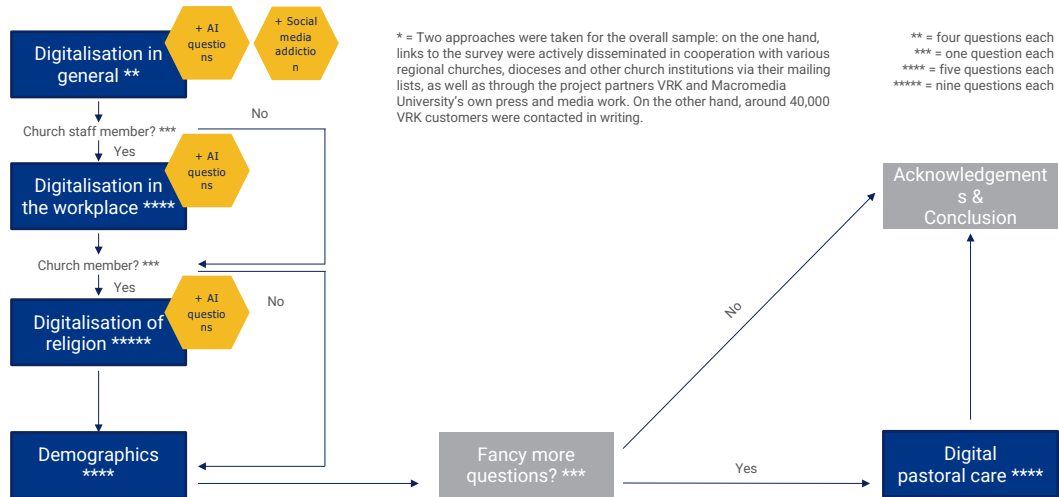


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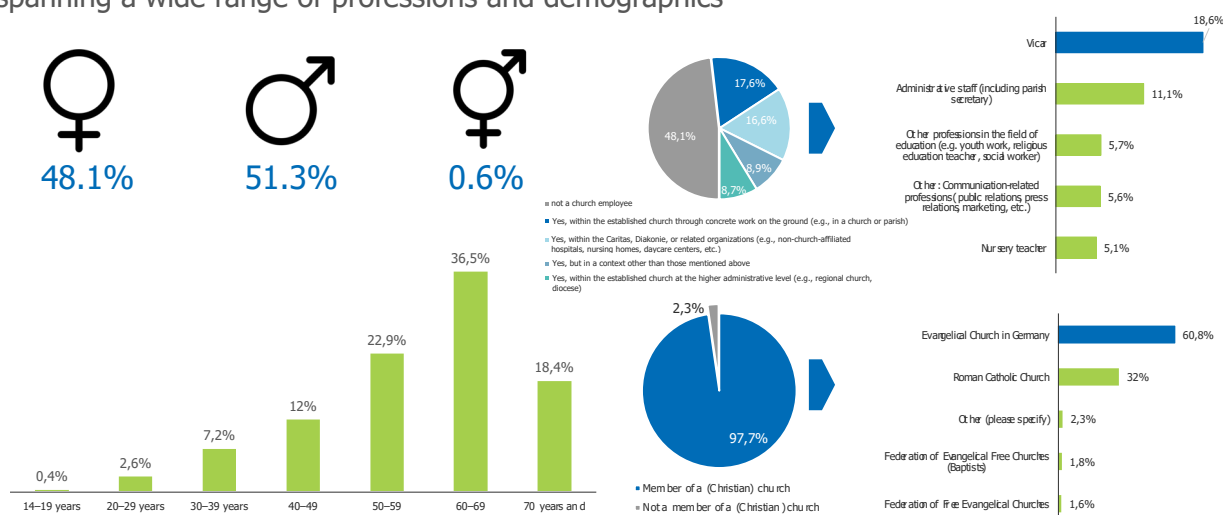
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The study behind this presentation is essentially divided into five sections and only a very small part can be presented today



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A total of 7,178 people took part in the study, comprising spanning a wide range of professions and demographics



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Let us now consider some general study findings on AI and the Church

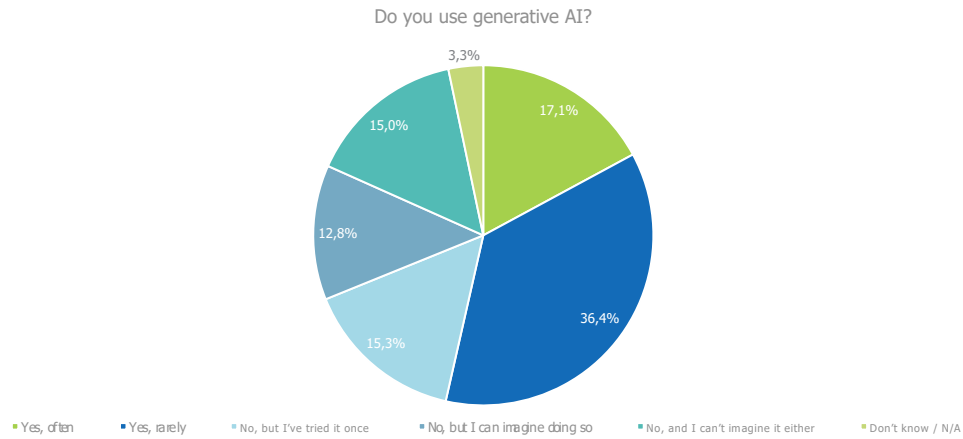
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Artificial intelligence (AI) has also caught on among church members and staff, and institutions are slowly catching up



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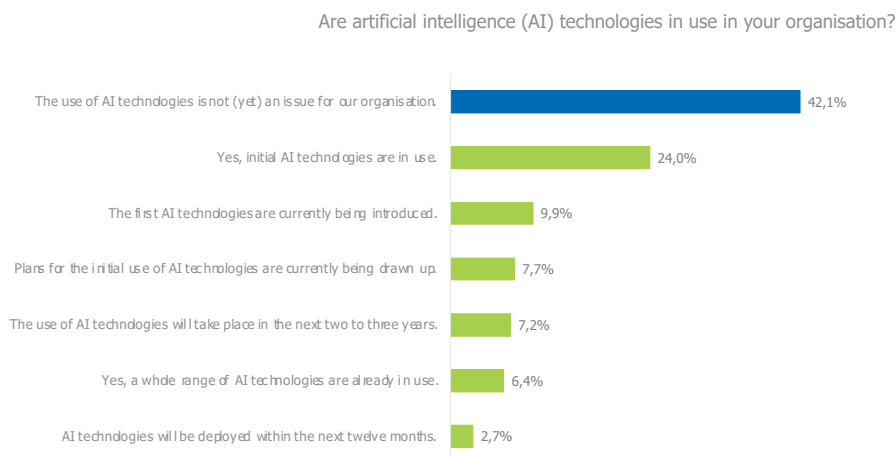
Just over half of the church members and staff use generative AI at least occasionally



Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church staff and members in Germany. n=7,136; question based on Bitkom, 2024, p.17.

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Just under 60 per cent of the employees surveyed now regard artificial intelligence (AI) as a significant issue within their church organisation



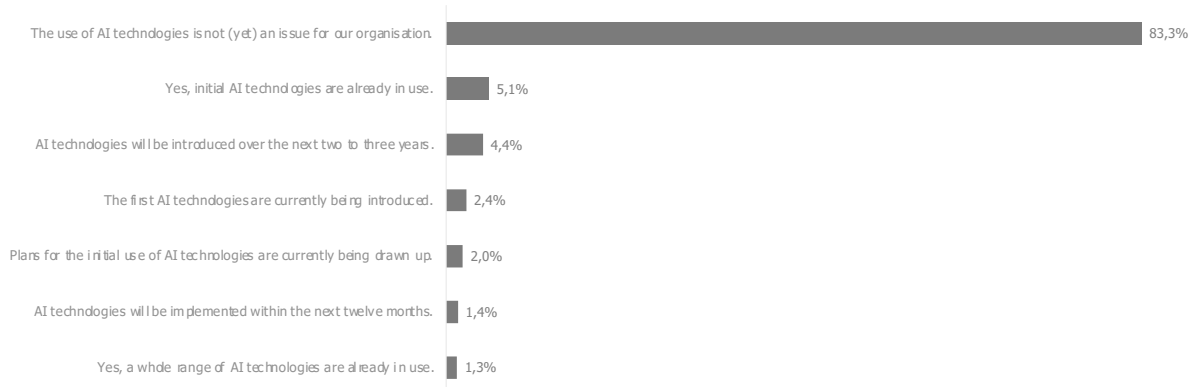
Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church employees in Germany. n=2,583; question based on IDG Research Services, 2021.

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In the church sector, AI technologies rarely an explicit topic



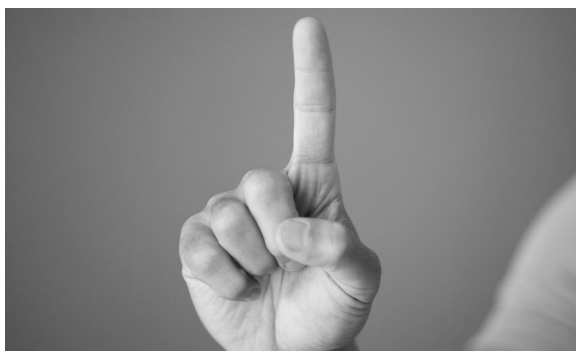
Are artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in use in your organisation?



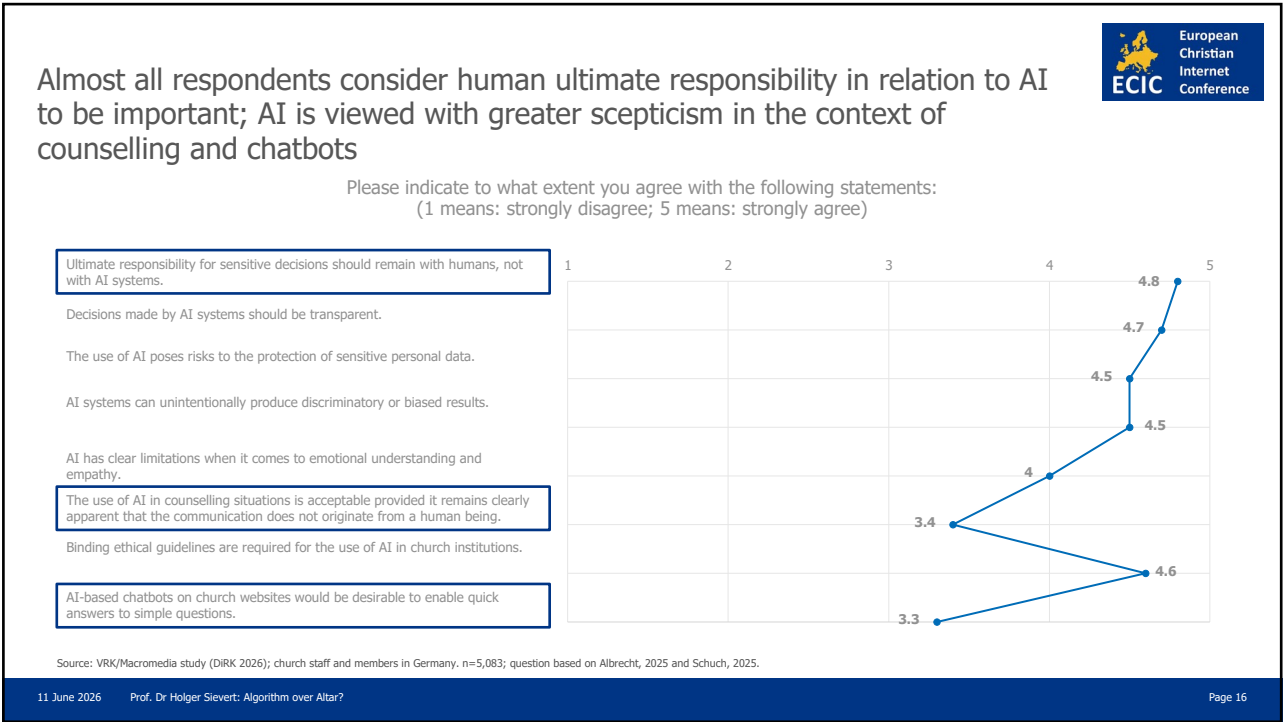
Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2023); church staff in Germany, n=1,419; question based on IDG study, 2021.

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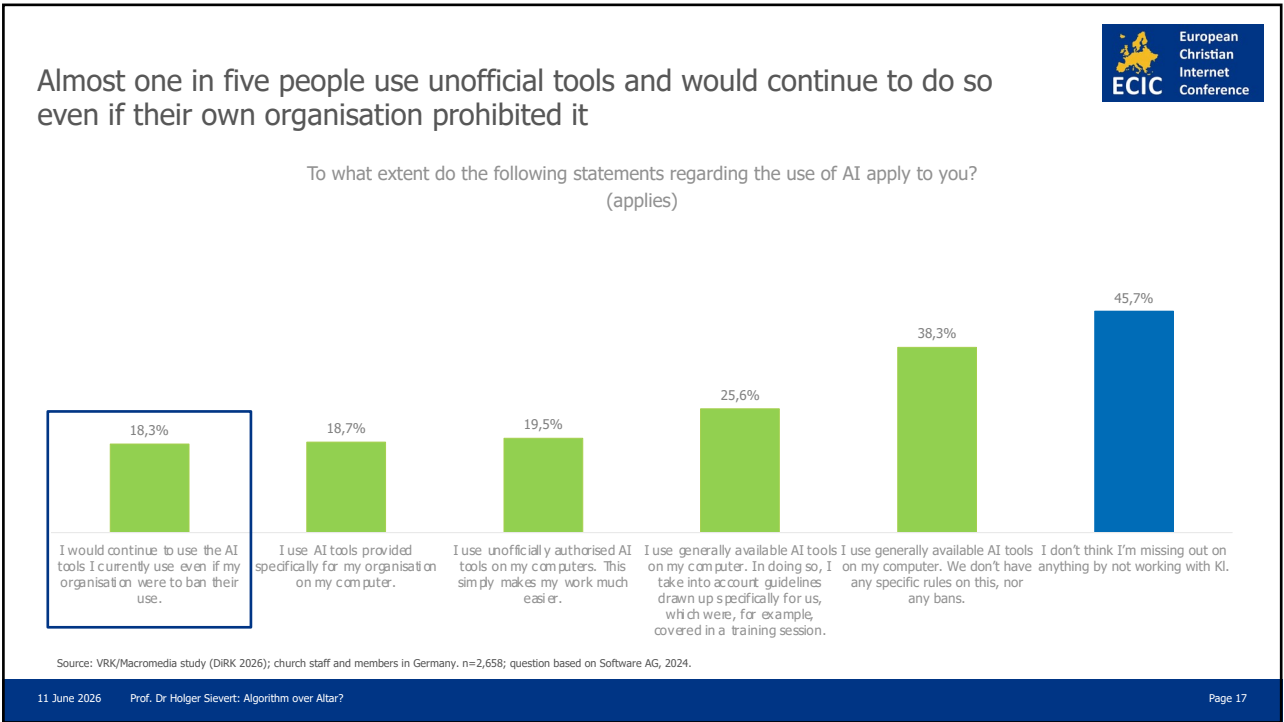
Church members place high ethical demands on AI, whilst some church staff take a very relaxed view of its practical application



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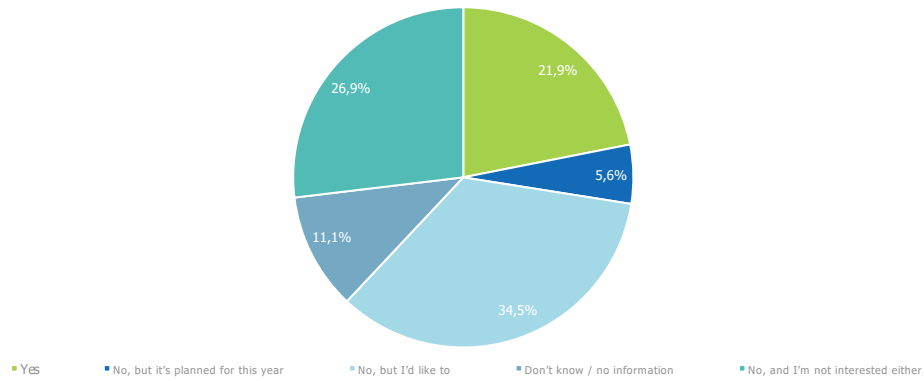
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Four out of five church staff members surveyed have not yet undertaken any further training in AI

Have you already undertaken further training in AI?



Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church staff and members in Germany. n=2,684; question based on Bitkom Research, 2024, p.12.

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Respondents generally consider digital pastoral care to be (very) important; however, there is a great deal of reluctance when it comes to specific AI tools

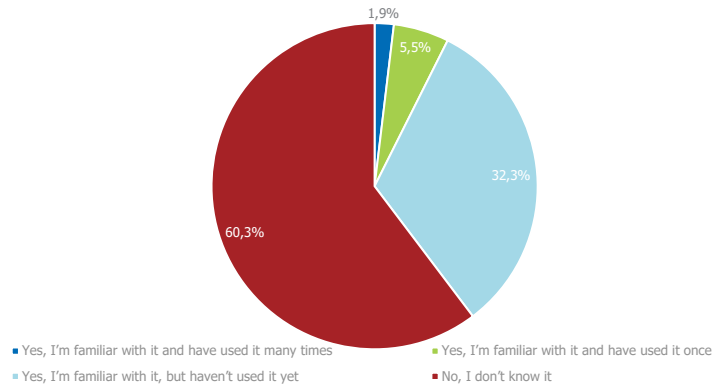


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Awareness of digital pastoral care services has been limited so far



Are you familiar with digital pastoral care services?



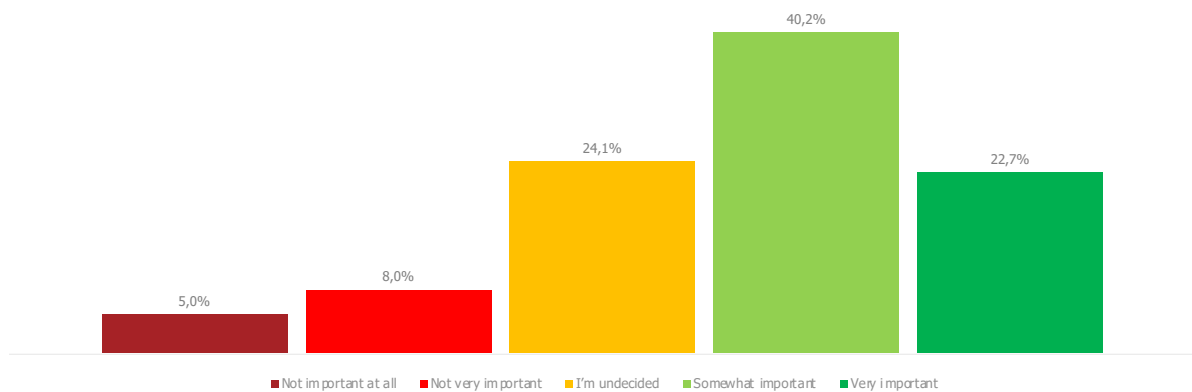
Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church staff and members in Germany. n=3,277; question based on Dietz et al., 2024, p.14.

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Many respondents consider digital pastoral care to be important



How important do you think it is that spiritual or pastoral support is also available digitally (e.g. video calls, chat, online platforms)?



Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church staff and members in Germany. n=3,273; question based on Winger et al., 2025, p. 11.

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However, when it comes to the practical use of AI in pastoral care, for example in the form of a chatbot, respondents express considerable reservations

What is your view on the use of AI in pastoral care?
(1 means: I completely reject it; 10 means: I strongly support it)

AI should be used directly in pastoral care's electronic communications (e.g. a dedicated, always-available automated chatbot developed in collaboration with pastoral carers).

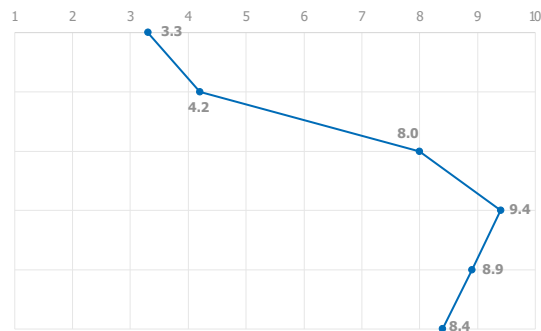
Pastoral care: AI can provide meaningful support to pastoral carers in their conversations.

AI should never replace personal pastoral care.

In pastoral care, AI should always be clearly identified as AI, regardless of its specific application.

The use of AI in pastoral care should be clearly regulated within the church, e.g. through guidelines

The use of AI in the treatment of mental health issues should generally be regulated by law.



Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church staff and members in Germany. n=3,228; partly based on Allensbach & Telekom, 2024.

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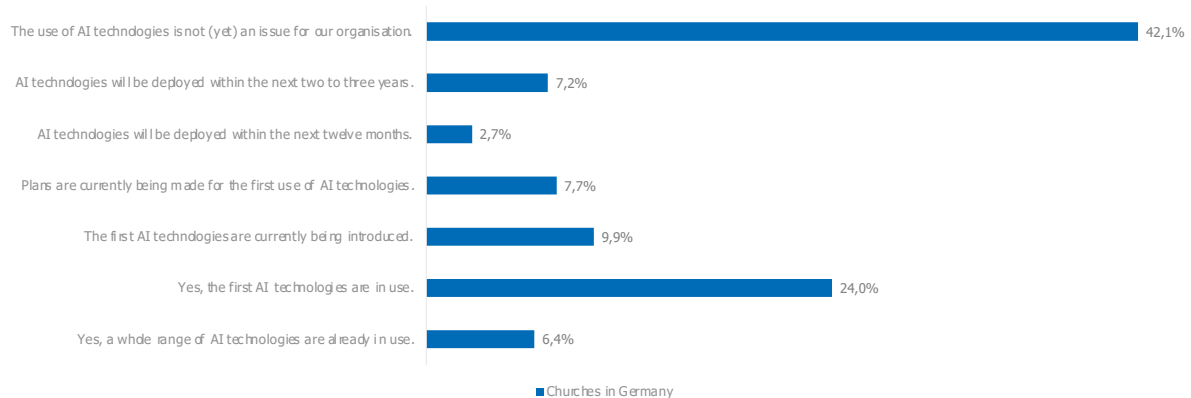
Let us now go one level deeper and look
– in line with my Geneva ECIC keynote –
at subgroups in more detail

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As we saw above, AI is meanwhile already an issue in some form in around 60 per cent of church institutions in Germany



Are artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in use within your organisation?



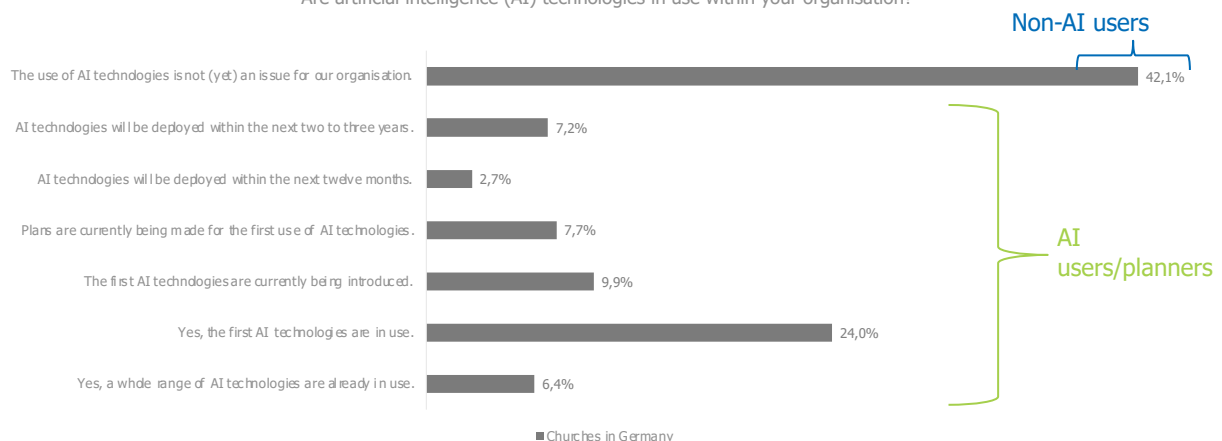
Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church staff in Germany, n=2,583; question based on IDG Research Services, 2021.

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But who exactly are those whose organisations use AI, and who are those that do not?



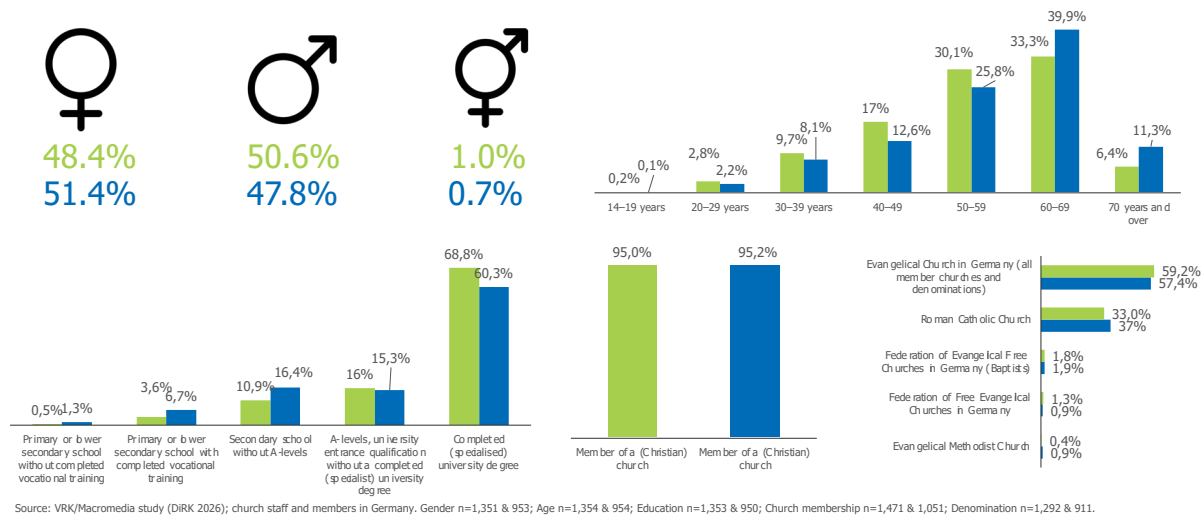
Are artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in use within your organisation?



Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church staff in Germany, n=2,583; question based on IDG Research Services, 2021.

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Church members who use AI tend to be male, middle-aged, Protestant and have a higher education qualification than those who do not use AI

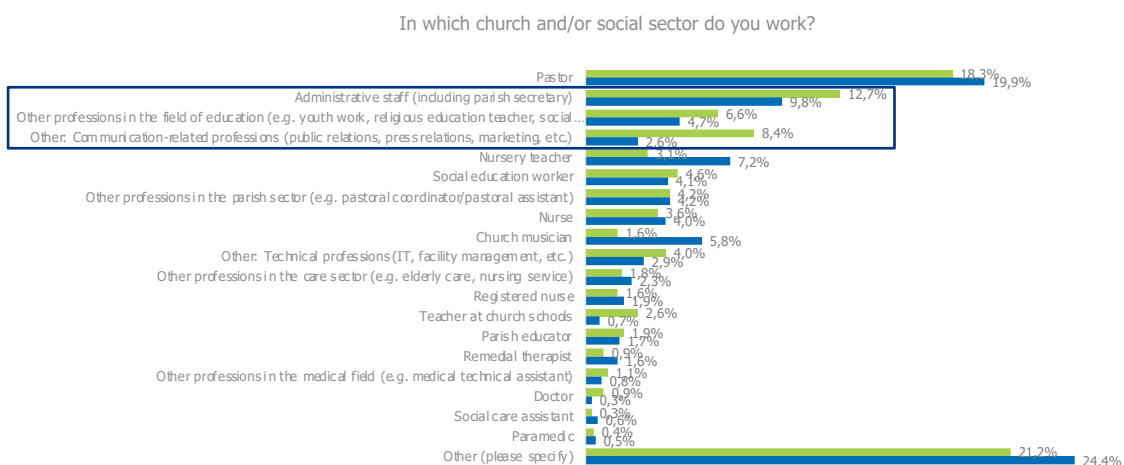


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There are a particularly high number of AI users compared to non-users are found in administrative, communication and many educational professions



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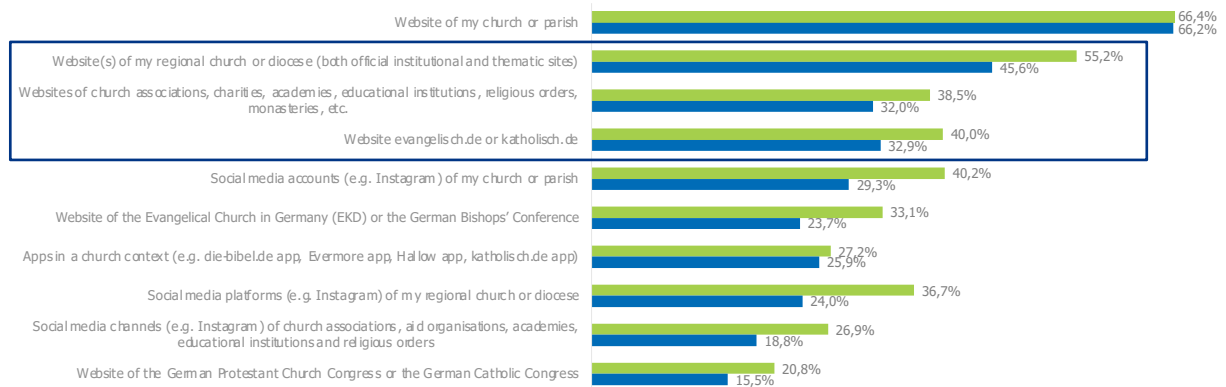
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AI users are significantly more interested in central church media of a country than non-AI users



Which of these online services do you use, and how often? (Top box for the top 10)



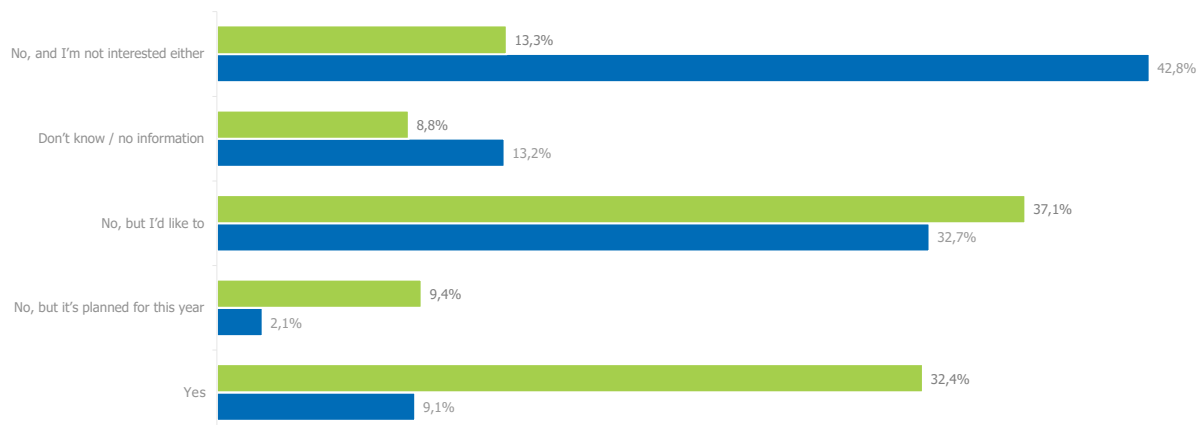
Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church members in Germany. n=1,286 & 907.

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Those who do not use AI are also more likely to avoid further training and have no interest in it



Have you already undertaken further training in AI?



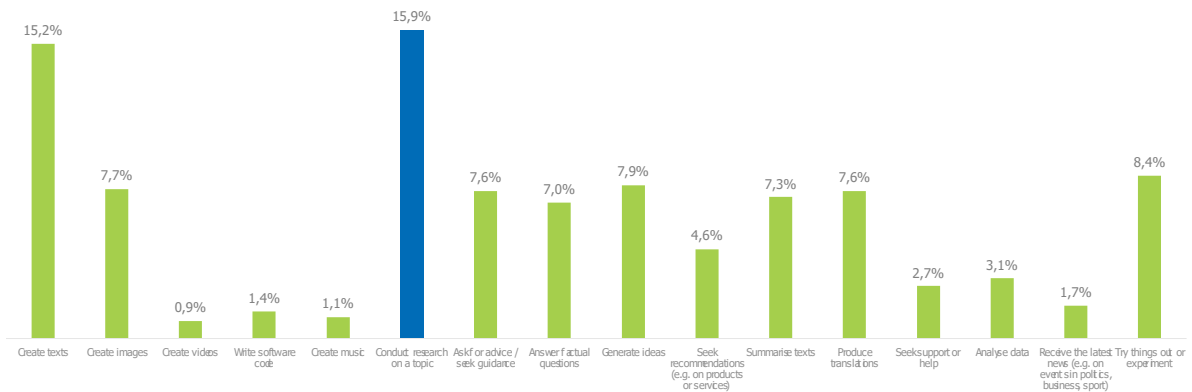
Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church staff and members in Germany. n=1,484 & 1,076; question based on Bitkom Research, 2024, p.12.

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Church staff use generative AI primarily for research and text creation



If so: What have you used AI for so far?
(Multiple answers allowed)



Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2025); church staff in Germany, n=3,002

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There are significant differences between the occupational groups (1)



	Pastor	Parish educator	Church musician	Other parish-related professions (e.g., pastoral coordinator / pastoral officer)	Nurse	Physician	Emergency medical technician / paramedic	Other medical professions (e.g., medical technical assistant)	Nursing professional	Special needs care worker
Create text	62,3%	66,7%	45,8%	77,0%	51,9%	46,7%	55,6%	22,2%	52,5%	50,0%
Create images	33,0%	40,0%	31,9%	38,0%	17,3%	20,0%	33,3%	18,5%	22,5%	19,2%
Create videos	4,1%	4,4%	2,8%	5,0%	3,7%	6,7%	0,0%	0,0%	2,5%	0,0%
Create software code	4,1%	2,2%	9,7%	7,0%	1,2%	0,0%	22,2%	0,0%	0,0%	3,8%
Create music	6,1%	6,7%	6,9%	9,0%	1,2%	6,7%	0,0%	0,0%	2,5%	0,0%
Conduct research on a topic	60,9%	53,3%	58,3%	67,0%	45,7%	40,0%	66,7%	51,9%	55,0%	50,0%
Ask for advice / seek guidance	25,7%	31,1%	25,0%	28,0%	27,2%	40,0%	33,3%	22,2%	30,0%	19,2%
Answer factual questions	33,4%	22,2%	31,9%	32,0%	9,9%	26,7%	22,2%	18,5%	30,0%	19,2%
Generate ideas	30,0%	33,3%	19,4%	52,0%	9,9%	0,0%	11,1%	7,4%	15,0%	26,9%
Get recommendations (e.g., for products or services)	15,9%	20,0%	18,1%	17,0%	9,9%	20,0%	11,1%	11,1%	22,5%	7,7%
Summarize texts	31,6%	35,6%	20,8%	31,0%	7,4%	0,0%	33,3%	7,4%	15,0%	30,8%
Create translations	35,2%	22,2%	23,6%	30,0%	16,0%	33,3%	33,3%	18,5%	15,0%	19,2%
Seek support or help	9,3%	6,7%	11,1%	10,0%	9,9%	0,0%	22,2%	3,7%	22,5%	3,8%
Analyze data	11,8%	4,4%	9,7%	15,0%	4,9%	6,7%	11,1%	3,7%	5,0%	15,4%
Get current news (e.g., politics, business, sports)	4,5%	8,9%	12,5%	5,0%	6,2%	0,0%	11,1%	11,1%	10,0%	3,8%
Try things out or experiment	33,2%	40,0%	19,4%	42,0%	14,8%	6,7%	33,3%	18,5%	27,5%	34,6%

Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2025); church staff in Germany, n= 2,350

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There are significant differences between the occupational groups (2)



	Social care assistant	Other care professions (e.g., elder care, nursing services)	Educator / childcare worker	Teacher at church schools	Social educator	Other education professions (e.g., youth work, religious education, social work)	Administrative staff (incl. parish secretary)	Other: communications roles (PR, press relations, marketing, etc.)	Other: technical roles (IT, facility management, etc.)	Other (please specify)
Create text	36,4%	31,1%	57,3%	53,7%	68,0%	73,0%	62,9%	84,0%	59,1%	52,8%
Create images	36,4%	15,6%	28,2%	34,1%	26,0%	37,6%	34,5%	56,0%	36,4%	24,9%
Create videos	0,0%	2,2%	1,8%	0,0%	1,0%	3,5%	3,7%	8,0%	13,6%	1,8%
Create software code	9,1%	4,4%	1,8%	4,9%	2,0%	5,0%	5,2%	9,3%	27,3%	3,5%
Create music	0,0%	2,2%	1,8%	7,3%	1,0%	6,4%	3,7%	8,7%	6,8%	4,4%
Conduct research on a topic	36,4%	46,7%	57,3%	85,4%	58,0%	62,4%	63,3%	81,3%	76,1%	62,2%
Ask for advice / seek guidance	27,3%	22,2%	33,6%	31,7%	29,0%	37,6%	32,6%	45,3%	33,0%	28,8%
Answer factual questions	18,2%	13,3%	11,8%	29,3%	20,0%	26,2%	27,0%	42,7%	26,1%	26,9%
Generate ideas	18,2%	15,6%	22,7%	31,7%	21,0%	46,8%	31,5%	72,0%	35,2%	27,9%
Get recommendations (e.g., for products or services)	9,1%	15,6%	15,5%	17,1%	13,0%	22,7%	20,2%	31,3%	28,4%	18,1%
Summarize texts	9,1%	20,0%	19,1%	31,7%	28,0%	42,6%	28,5%	62,0%	36,4%	27,5%
Create translations	54,5%	13,3%	18,2%	31,7%	30,0%	36,9%	27,3%	46,0%	31,8%	29,0%
Seek support or help	0,0%	13,3%	17,3%	2,4%	6,0%	12,8%	12,7%	17,3%	23,9%	8,9%
Analyze data	9,1%	8,9%	4,5%	7,3%	9,0%	14,2%	13,9%	27,3%	22,7%	11,8%
Get current news (e.g., politics, business, sports)	9,1%	8,9%	6,4%	4,9%	6,0%	5,0%	7,1%	5,3%	9,1%	6,8%
Try things out or experiment	9,1%	11,1%	22,7%	26,8%	26,0%	39,0%	37,5%	57,3%	48,9%	36,2%

Source: VRK/Macromedia study (DIRK 2026); church staff in Germany, n= 2,350

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Let's summarise the findings once again...

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We had initially looked at general findings regarding the Church and AI



Artificial intelligence (AI) has also made its way into the lives of church members and staff, and institutions are slowly catching up

Church members hold AI to high ethical standards, while some church staff take a very relaxed view of its practical application

Respondents generally consider digital pastoral care to be (very) important; however, there is a great deal of hesitation when it comes to specific AI tools

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We then took a closer look at some sub-groups of AI usage within the church



- Church **AI users** tend to be male, middle-aged, Protestant and hold a higher university degree than **non-users**
- There are a particularly high number of **AI users** compared to **non-users** in communications professions and in the education sector
- **AI users** are significantly more interested in central church media than **non-users**
- **Non-users of AI** are also more likely to avoid further training and have no interest in it
- Church staff use generative AI primarily for research and text creation
- There are significant differences between the professional groups

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These findings can also be usefully contextualised against the new papal encyclical



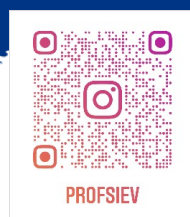
- In his new encyclical, Leo XIV sees '**great** humanity' facing an important decision: either to create 'a new Tower of Babel' or a 'city in which God and humanity dwell together'. These two aspects are also reflected in our survey results:
 - on the one hand, **ethical demands** for **human oversight** of AI receive very high levels of support among church members;
 - on the other hand, members and staff alike make quite extensive use of AI themselves, particularly for ecclesiastical and religious purposes.
- Conversely, however, the Church must also take care not to contribute to the construction of this new '**Tower of Babel**' itself: the study results show, for example, that **one in five church workers** would use specific individual **AI tools** even if these **were** potentially **banned** within their organisation. It is, however, not credible to preach ethics with a raised index finger whilst oneself operating quite heavily in grey areas.
- The Pope's guiding principle that AI must '**serve humanity, not power**' should therefore apply equally to the Church itself: AI can help **empower church members** – and hold **church leaders** more accountable **through dialogue**. This represents a major opportunity, particularly in view of the decline of the mainstream church in the Western world, for example in Germany.



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Thank you very much for your attention!

Contact: h.sievert@macromedia.de



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