Leading the Church
*in an **Age of AI***

PAIR SHARE



What's changed since last year in how you, your church, or the people around you use AI?

Has any of it affected you?

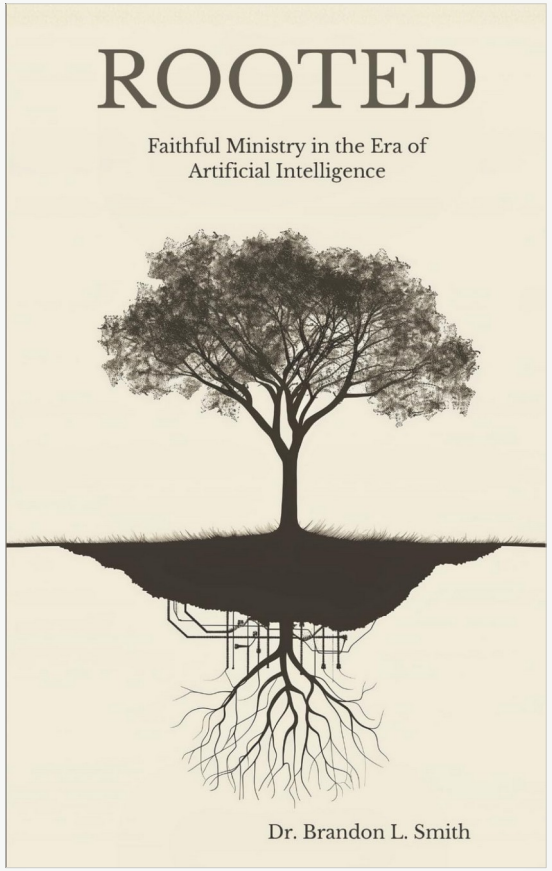
ALLIANCE NEW ENGLAND

WHERE TO START

Rooted

Faithful Ministry in the Era of Artificial Intelligence

DR. BRANDON L. SMITH · 2026



Includes a discussion guide for staff, elder boards, and small groups.

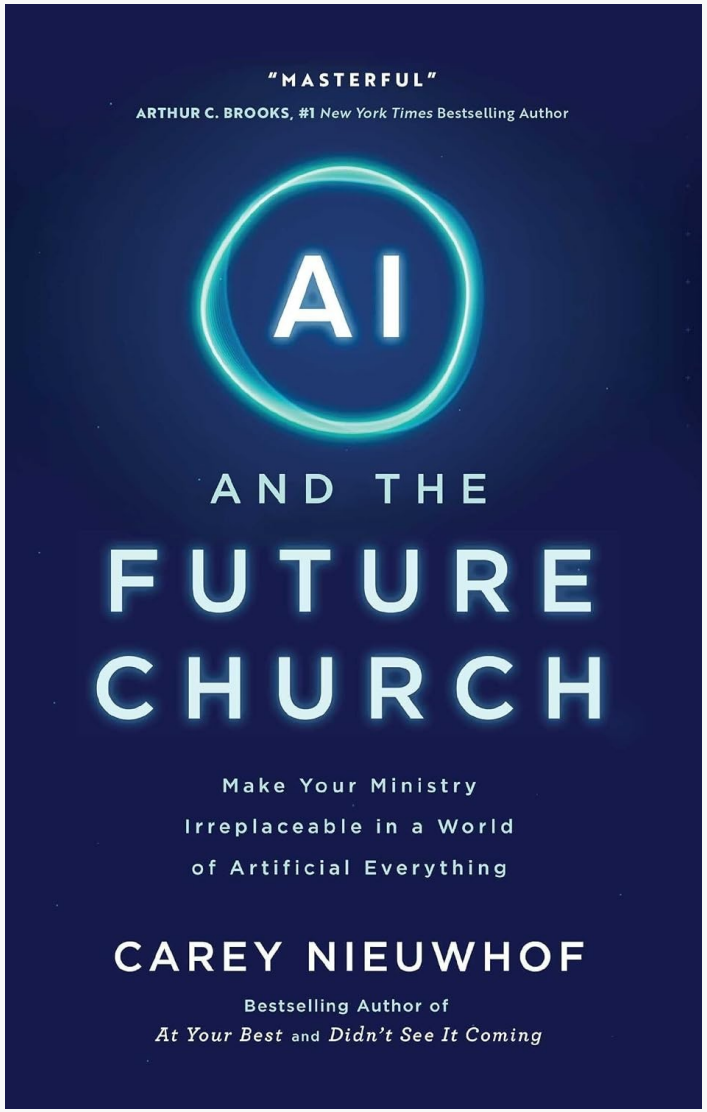
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WHERE TO START

AI and the Future Church

Carey Nieuwhof · 2026

Includes an AI companion AI Hub



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SINCE LAST YEAR

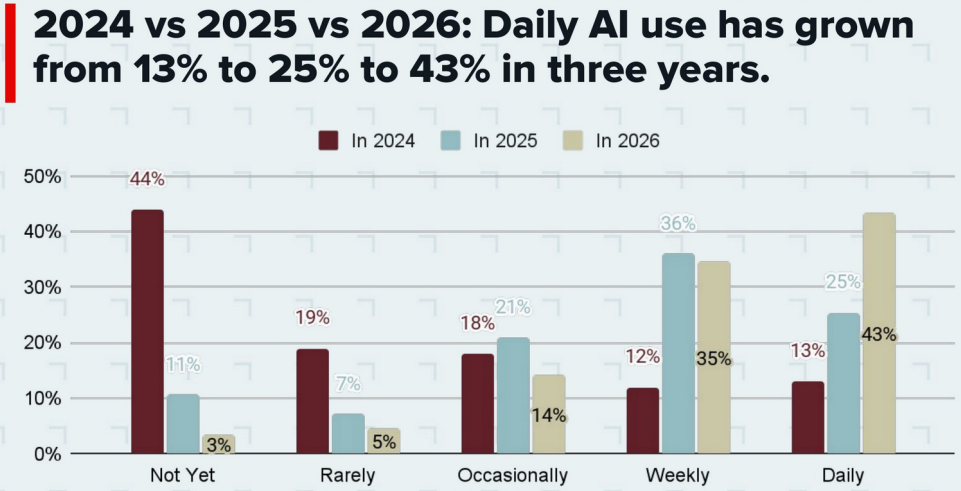
Use jumped.

Key Findings

78%

of church leaders now use AI weekly or daily, up from 61% in 2025 and 43% in 2024.





78% weekly or daily (61% last year)

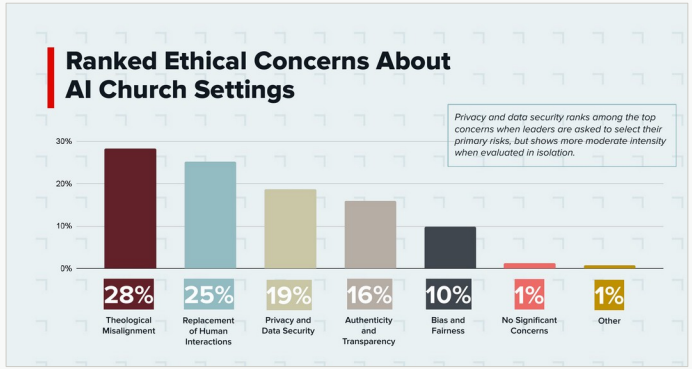
Daily: 13% → 25% → 43%

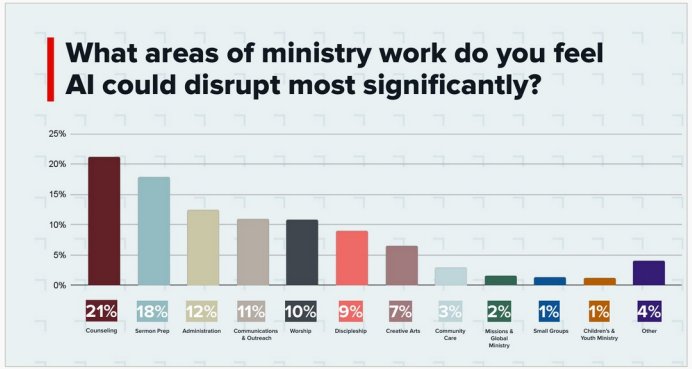
Only **2.4%** avoid AI.

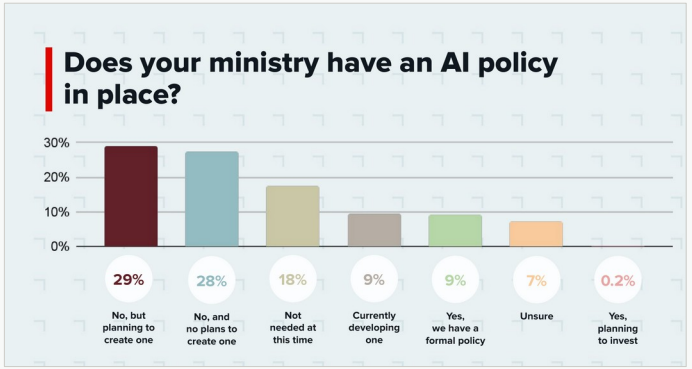
EXPONENTIAL, STATE OF AI IN THE CHURCH 2026 (N=509) · PP. 13, 15, 17

SINCE LAST YEAR

Worry didn’t drop, and policy lags.







25%

rank replacing human interaction as a top concern (23% last year)

21%

expect counseling and pastoral care to be disrupted most (14% last year)

9%

have a formal AI policy (6% last year)

EXPONENTIAL, STATE OF AI IN THE CHURCH 2026 (N=509) · PP. 35–36, 53, 61

OUR PEOPLE ARE AHEAD OF US

Our people use AI more than we do.

IN THEIR PERSONAL LIVES

44% practicing Christians

16% pastors

AT WORK

39% practicing Christians

24% pastors

BARNA, JUL 21, 2026 · USE AI OFTEN OR VERY OFTEN · GROUPS SURVEYED SEPARATELY

ANE | ALLIANCE NEW ENGLAND

Lead, Not Follow

MORE THAN WE KNOW

“The danger for pastors is underestimating just how normal AI is for the people around them.”

DANIEL COPELAND, BARNA VP OF RESEARCH · BARNA, JUL 21, 2026

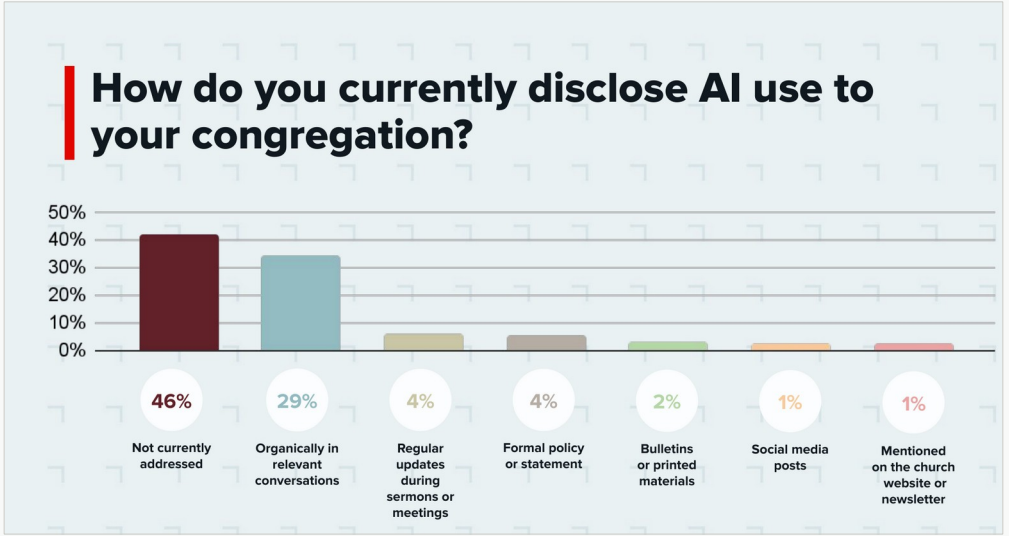
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They're asking, and we're not ready.

31% of practicing Christians want guidance from their pastor on AI

12% of pastors feel comfortable teaching on it

46% of churches haven't addressed their AI use with their congregation



GLOO/BARNA, FEB 19, 2026 (31%, 12%) · EXPONENTIAL 2026, P. 62 (46%)

TABLES

1 Where do you see your people already using AI?

2 If one of your people asked you this Sunday, “How should a Christian use AI?”, what would you say?

3 What would help you feel ready to teach about AI?

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Dangers are real. Opportunities are real.

"Writing off AI entirely is as dangerous as embracing it blindly."

CAREY NIEUWHOF, AI AND THE FUTURE CHURCH, P. 39

"The church needs to stop spectating and start leading."

CAREY NIEUWHOF, AI AND THE FUTURE CHURCH

The Heart and the Tool

God has always used tools.

We often think of technology as good or evil, but it is the orientation of the heart determines the nature of the tool.

BRANDON L. SMITH, ROOTED, P. 48

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AI is a tool.

It is, however, the first tool that talks back. It is a powerful tool that *can form us*, which brings us to *the heart*.

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Three questions for any AI tool

1. Does it keep you from fellowship, or remove a barrier to fellowship?
2. Does it help you see clearly, or generate an illusion?
3. Does it empower you, or replace you?

AI that writes your sermons: replaces.
AI that helps you research, organize or keep track: empowers.

BRANDON L. SMITH, ROOTED, P. 50

THE LENS

Does this free us for more human connection, or replace it?

What Won’t Change

FOUNDATION

The world is changing fast.

1 “The church’s future direction is human connection. As the world becomes more artificial, the church’s calling is to be more human.”

CAREY NIEUWHOF, AI AND THE FUTURE CHURCH, P. 4

2 The church possesses the one thing AI can never offer: the ministry of presence.

Smith, Rooted, P. 84

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HOLD ON TO THE KNOWN

"When everything is unknown, hold on to the known. Anchoring your leadership in what's clear, to navigate what is not clear, is always a wise strategy."

CAREY NIEUWHOF, AI AND THE FUTURE CHURCH, P. 7

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"Even an AI-saturated world will still need strong human relationships and an authentic connection to an unchanging God."

CAREY NIEUWHOF, AI AND THE FUTURE CHURCH, P. 6

67%

of leaders name replacing human interaction as a concern

Top Concerns

Replacement of human interactions was cited by 67% of respondents as a top ethical concern. This concern is directly connected to the 18% of church leaders who said they are not comfortable using AI for pastoral care at all. The church's identity is fundamentally relational, built on presence, empathy, and spiritual accompaniment. Leaders are drawing a clear line between AI as a ministry tool and AI as a substitute for human pastoral work.



A CRISIS OF RELATIONSHIP

"For the church, Ai companions presents a disruption that cuts to the very heart of what it means to be human. We are facing a crisis of relationship. In a world starved for connection, technology is offering a synthetic substitute. It is offering the feeling of intimacy without the demands of a person. There is a profound ache that drives them to the machine. AI never gets bored of you and with it you are always emotionally justified."

BRANDON L. SMITH, ROOTED, P. 78

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THE UPSIDE

The upside is real.

We may see a generation turning to God because they've exhausted the artificial alternative and come up empty.

THE LENS

The church is uniquely positioned for this crisis.

Lean into human connection.

The goal isn't to be a church where everyone knows everyone, the goal is to be a church where *everyone is known.*

Work, Identity, and Mental Health

Build the shock absorbers now

Is the church ready?

Job loss could be significant.

Many people get their identity from what they do. What happens when they're not needed for it anymore?

"The more human and unique the work, the harder it is to replace. The more digital and rote the work, the faster it disappears."

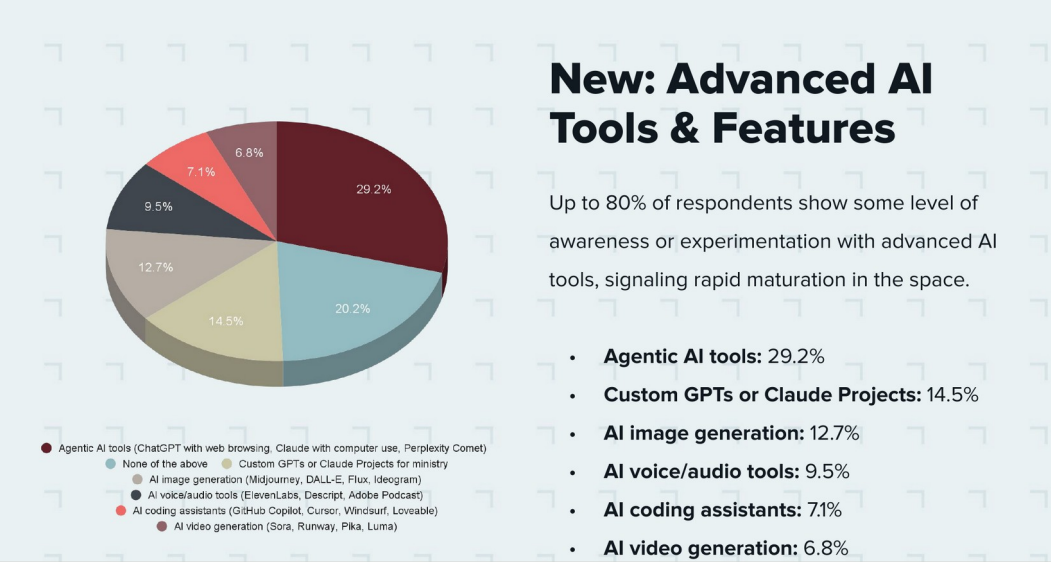
CAREY NIEUWHOF, AI AND THE FUTURE CHURCH, P. 143

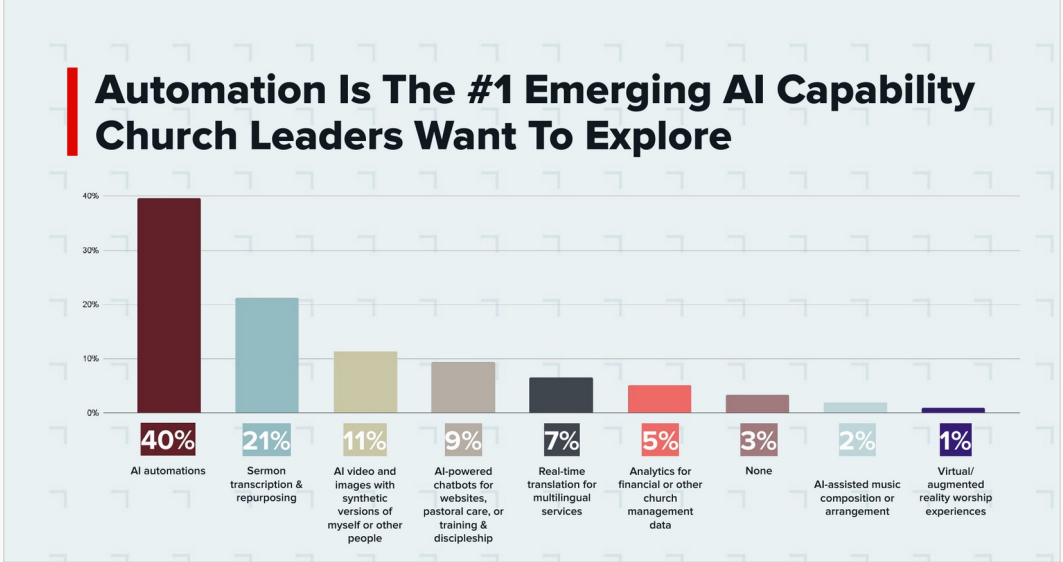
3 SHIFTS

1. Make Sundays **non-downloadable.**
2. Build the shock absorbers now.
3. **Fortify your integrity.**

Agentic AI

Leaders are starting to explore agents.





29% are exploring agentic AI tools

40% name automation the #1 capability to explore

EXPONENTIAL, STATE OF AI IN THE CHURCH 2026 (N=509) · PP. 21, 43

FROM ANSWERS TO ACTION

Chatbots answer.

You ask. It replies. You do the rest.

Agents act.

They take a goal and carry it out in your tools.

Accountability can’t be delegated.

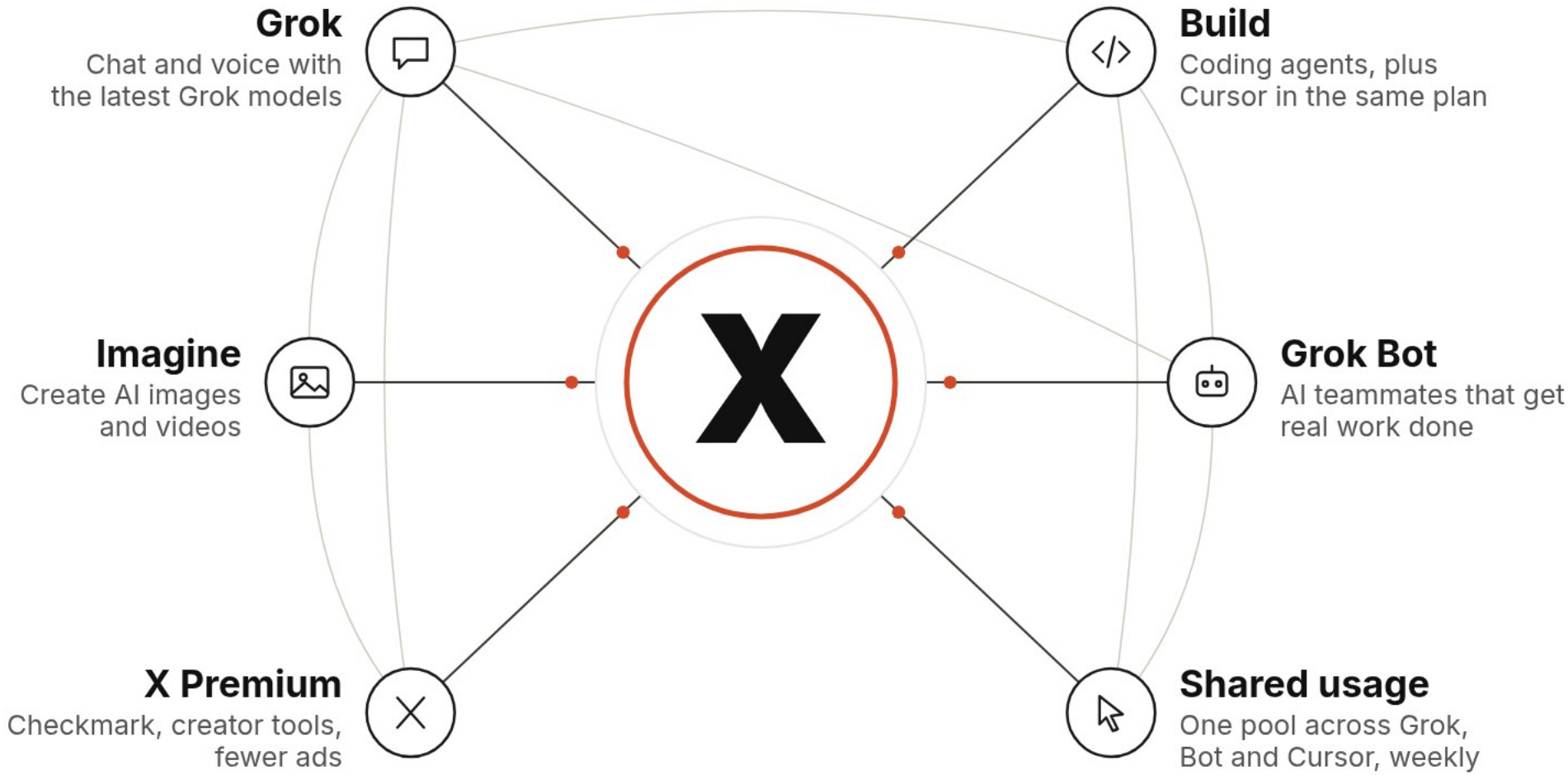
You answer for what an agent does in your name.

COLOSSIANS 3:17

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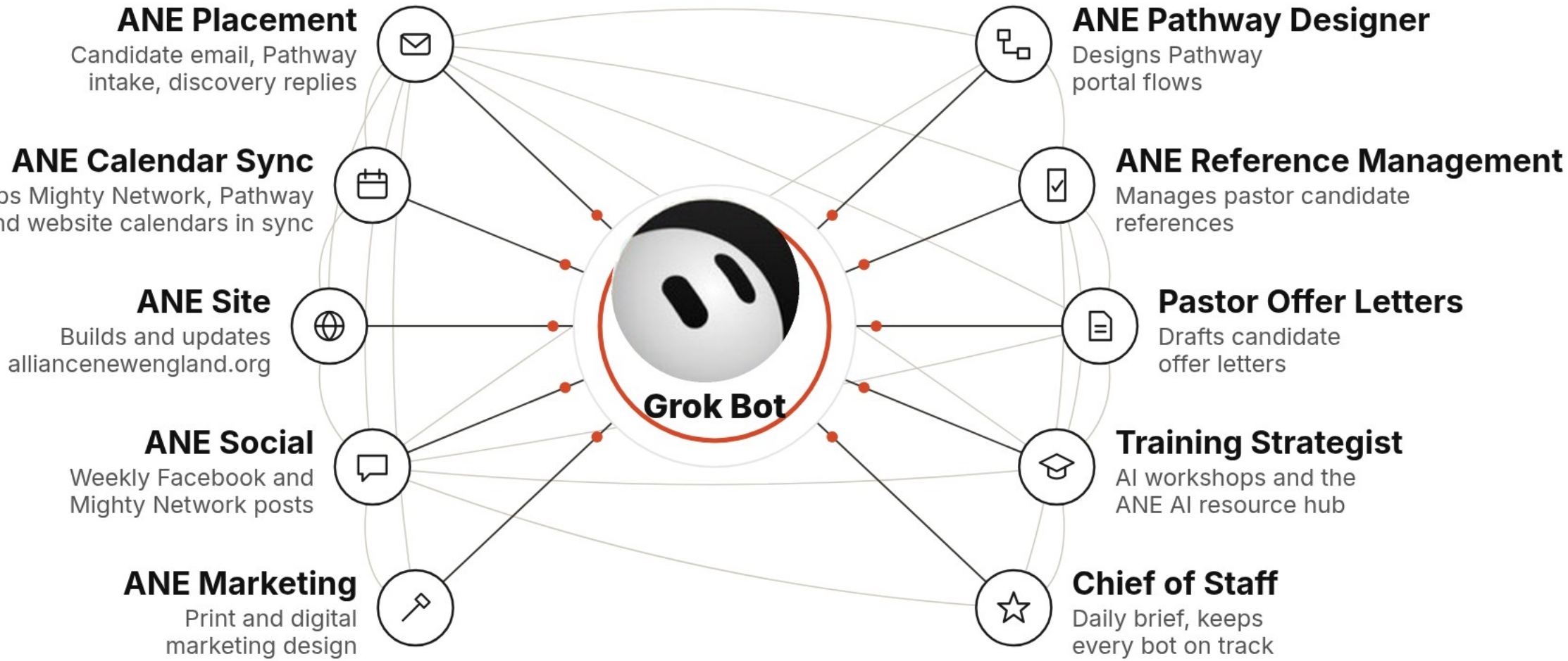
One Subscription. Everything Included.

Full bundle on Premium and higher. Plus includes Grok, Imagine images and Build.



Think, create, build and delegate. One plan.

My ANE Bot Team



One assistant. A whole district team. I just approve.

Example: Rather than asking AI to help prepare a training event, an agent could review registrations, organize participant information, prepare materials, draft follow-up emails, create an action list and remind you when you need it to.

FEATURED AGENT DEMO · SITE SIMULATION

SIMULATION homepage: Christ Chapel

1. The agent **drives the website editor itself.**
2. **Public facts only.** An unpublished draft.
3. **Nothing goes live** until I've reviewed it.

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TABLES · 10 MIN

1 If an assistant took the task you circled, where would you put the time you starred?

2 What should an assistant never do in your name? Write one rule.

3 Draft 3 lines of a church AI guideline.

RULES GO ON THE AGENT NEVER-RULES FLIPCHART · ONLY 9% HAVE A FORMAL AI POLICY (P. 61)

Vibecoding



AI & Automation

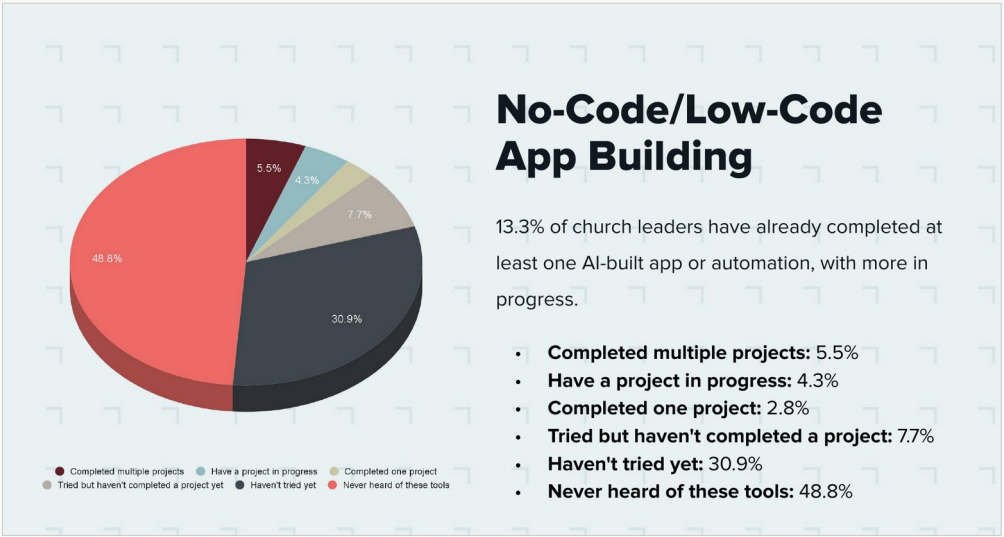
Over the past year, AI adoption in the church has moved beyond simple content generation. Leaders are beginning to ask how these tools can connect into repeatable workflows that serve people more consistently. The same activities that dominate current usage, like sermon transcription, Bible study creation, and small group content, are now pointing toward systematization with AI. This shift reflects that the focus is moving from isolated tasks to integrated systems that support ministry at scale.

Last year you chatted with AI. This year it builds.

Describe what you want in plain English.
It builds a working app.

13%
have built one

49%
have never heard of these tools



No-Code/Low-Code App Building

13.3% of church leaders have already completed at least one AI-built app or automation, with more in progress.

- **Completed multiple projects:** 5.5%
- **Have a project in progress:** 4.3%
- **Completed one project:** 2.8%
- **Tried but haven't completed a project:** 7.7%
- **Haven't tried yet:** 30.9%
- **Never heard of these tools:** 48.8%

Sample data only · No prayer requests or personal info · A human owns every tool

Lovable: Vibecoding Example



From Rote to Human

YOUR WORKSHEET

The Rote-to-Human Scale

THE LENS *Does this free us for more human connection, or replace it?*

sermon research · newsletter writing · event planning

scheduling volunteers · slide formatting · minutes

hospital visits · counseling · discipleship

email reminders · attendance · social drafts

prayer with people · preaching · crisis care



◀ **ROTE**
digital, repetitive, replaceable

in between

HUMAN ▶
relational, unique, irreplaceable

◯ **The rote task I'd hand off:**

★ **The human ministry I'd give it to:**

ON YOUR OWN · 4 MIN · STAY SEATED

Map your week.

1. List **6–8 things you did last week.**
2. Write each one **where it falls on the line** from ROTE to HUMAN.
3. **Circle** one rote task you'd hand off.
4. **Star ★** one human ministry you'd give that time to.

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Become More Human

WHERE WE STARTED

Human connection is still #1.

1 **Hold on to the known.** P. 7

2 **Run every tool through the heart test.** SMITH, PP. 48, 50

3 **Keep asking the lens.**

THE LENS

Does this free us for more human connection, or replace it?

THE NEW CENTRAL QUESTION

"In 2024 and 2025, the central question was whether church leaders were open to AI. The new central question is whether the church can build the wisdom, governance, and relational integrity to use AI well."

EXPONENTIAL, STATE OF AI IN THE CHURCH 2026, P. 77

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THE CHARGE

“The church needs to stop spectating and start leading.”

Carey Nieuwhof

RESOURCES

Everything from today

- **Start here: Rooted**, Brandon L. Smith
- **AI and the Future Church**, Carey Nieuwhof
- Barna/Gloo **Faith & AI** series
- **Lovable**

SCAN OR VISIT



ane-ai-resources.lovable.app

The challenge:

- ○ One rote task I'll hand off
- ★ One human ministry I'll reinvest that time in

