

Christian creators design chatbots with ‘biblical worldview’

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—From a young age, Nils Gulbranson remembers asking a lot of questions during Bible studies. Gulbranson describes spending his free time as a teen Googling Christian scholars’ views on different topics, digging through sermons and scouring YouTube videos until he found satisfying answers.

With the release of Chat GPT, the former computer science student turned finance intern saw an opportunity to build the resource he wished he’d had as a young evangelical Christian in Minnesota.

About three months ago, Gulbranson, 23, started work on Biblemate.io, a “Christian ChatGPT” to help interrogative minds who are looking for biblical answers to life’s difficult questions.

“The big difference from ChatGPT is that it’s a model grounded in a biblical and theological view of the world,” Gulbranson, now a finance intern in Boston, said about his version of the chatbot. It relies on an ever-growing database of sermons, books and academic articles to inform the answers it offers.

AI raises ethical questions

The launch of ChatGPT in November 2022 by the research laboratory OpenAI has spurred both excitement and trepidation among Christians, forcing existential questions on the level of what it means to be human,

along with ethical dilemmas: How much is too much help from a chatbot when writing a sermon? What about leading a whole worship service, like a ChatGPT avatar did in early June at a Lutheran church in Germany?

Gulbranson sees a number of uses for Biblemate.io in a church context—for pastors doing sermon research, for church volunteers drafting a Bible study guide, for curious teens like he once was who want to go deeper in youth group.

But he also hopes non-Christians will use the chatbot for their questions about God. He pointed to one of his favorite features, the “explain to me like I’m 5” tool.

“You type a hard-to-understand theological concept, and it would dumb it down and explain it the way you would to a 5-year-old kid,” he said.

“The goal is to give responses rooted in unwavering biblical truth,” said Gulbranson, who said he tried to generate sources from “well-respected scholars” for his database, citing William Lane Craig and C.S. Lewis. Of course, Gulbranson acknowledged, not every Christian agrees on just what is biblical truth.

For example, he explained, on a question such as whether Christians should speak in tongues, the chatbot should pull out what the Scriptures say and then offer perspectives from different denominations.

Gulbranson wants Biblemate.io to give politically neutral responses on topics where Christians often don’t see eye to eye, such as same-sex marriage or LGBTQ ordination.

“I don’t want to create a division because we see it all the time with Christians that are more conservative and Christians that are more progressive,” said Gulbranson, who declined to reveal which camp he identifies with.

“Jesus himself was not a socialist. He wasn’t a capitalist. He never explicitly said: Hey, this is the correct political ideology,” he added.

Seeking input on how to improve product

Soon after its release, Gulbranson sought feedback from other Christians on social media. On the Facebook group “AI for Church Leaders & Pastors,” he brainstormed with fellow AI enthusiasts about how to improve his new chatbot.

The group of nearly 4,000 members, including pastors, churchgoers and worship leaders, chats about creative ways to use tools such as ChatGPT, Jasper (an AI content generator) or MidJourney (images generator) in their ministries.

Joe Suh, an engineer, also finds himself regularly asking for advice from the group on his new project. At the beginning of the year, he started developing Pastors.ai, a chatbot that draws on churches’ sermon libraries to answer people’s questions. It’s a chatbot, Suh said, that he initially designed for himself.

“I wanted to be able to ask my pastor some very personal questions: How should Christians think about divorce? How do we love our LGBTQ+ neighbors? Questions I would be a little bit shy to ask in person. Now we can do that, because it’s read hundreds of hours of sermons,” he said.

For this 45-year-old who has worked in Silicon Valley for 25 years, Pastors.ai was also an occasion to reconnect with his faith. When his church moved online during the pandemic, staying engaged and paying attention was hard, he admitted.

Excited by ChatGPT’s launch, he teamed up with co-workers from the e-

commerce software firm he founded in 2022 and worked full time on the chatbot.

Recently, Pastors.ai obtained OpenAI credits and Suh plans to demonstrate the tool at numerous AI events this year.

Mixed reactions from Christians

The biggest challenge, he said, is to get churches to accept it.

“There are mixed reactions. In one camp, people are blown away. They think it’s magical,” Suh said. “A second camp is a bit more skeptical, especially church leaders.”

Some pastors even went as far as questioning the chatbot’s claims, arguing the tool distorts their words.

“That has been an interesting reaction,” Suh said with a laugh.

In a recent article, RJ Kang, a Presbyterian pastor from Illinois, pointed out that as interesting as these AI tools are, church leaders need to remain careful “not to rely on it as a replacement for the discernment that comes from prayer and seeking God’s will.”

In November 2020, as part of his monthly prayer intention, Pope Francis noted AI could “make a better world possible, if it’s joined to the common good,” but he also invited Christians to pray the tool always remains at the service of human intelligence.

During June’s Southern Baptist Convention meeting in New Orleans, messengers adopted resolutions regarding AI, urging pastors to use these tools in “honest, transparent, and Christlike ways.”

For Gulbranson, this vigilance isn’t surprising.

“It’s a new uncharted territory,” he said. “AI among Christians might seem a bit taboo.”

It’s only a matter of time before churches understand more clearly how these technologies work and how to benefit from AI tools, explained Suh. “Once they know, they will make rules around it.”