Pharos Journal of Theology ISSN 2414-3324 online Volume 107 (2) Regular Issue (2026)

Nipping Church *(ab)*use of AI in the bud with theological training in Zimbabwe

Kimion Tagwirei[1]
The Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2109-1170

Ray Motsi[2]
Theological College of Zimbabwe, Practical Theology Department, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3077-3345

Vimbai Superior Goredema[3]
Theological College of Zimbabwe, Library Department, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.107.226

Abstract

Although the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) in Zimbabwe has been generally slow, because of manifold factors, its use is gradually increasing in all sectors, including religion. Multiple studies have explored the problems and solutions of AI in science, education and other areas but there is a gap regarding the use and abuse of AI in churches in Zimbabwe. Because the Church ought to be the salt and light of the world (Mathew 5:13–16), influencing and transforming the world in everything, Christians are expected to exemplify integrity and to use AI responsibly, while observing Christian and professional ethics. Through a qualitative literature review and the theory of acceptance and use of technology, this paper explores the (ab)use of AI in the church, and how theological colleges can mitigate the situation before it becomes unmanageable. The study found that the misuse of AI is increasing in churches and betraying the Church's ecclesiastic position of being the conscience of society. Because theological institutions are entrusted to equip church leaders for ministry, they can troubleshoot (ab)use of AI by incorporating AI and relevant technology-related skills in their theology curricula, to empower trainees with Godly conviction and academic integrity, and offer refresher training to accommodate those who are already serving the Church and society, even if they have limited skills or knowledge regarding AI.

Keywords: Church; Leadership; Artificial intelligence; Abuse; Training

Definition of Keywords

Considering that the terms "abuse" and "misuse" are used often in this paper, it is important to clarify their contextual meaning:

Abuse: The term abuse means "a corrupt practice or custom, or improper or excessive use or treatment" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abuse). In this paper, abuse is used to refer to the unethical use of artificial intelligence in ecclesiastic contexts, for example, copying AI definitions of biblical terms or textual interpretations without reference to spiritual inspiration and contextual application.

Misuse: This term means "to use something in an unsuitable way or in a way that was not intended" (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/misuse). We use the term misuse for using AI in ways that it should not be used in ecclesiological settings.

Introduction

The pace of adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) in Zimbabwe has been generally slow, because of multiple factors, such as limited technical knowledge, cultural disruptions, high implementation costs, political and socio-economic crises, digital and other infrastructural deficits, policy gaps and lack of integration and collaboration (Dube, 2025; Mutambara, 2025). Nevertheless, Zimbabweans are gradually starting to use AI tools such as *ChatGPT*, *Grok* and *Meta* in almost all sectors. According to Tagwirei (2025), the church has also started using AI for research, hermeneutics, administration, communication and related activities. Sadly, because of a lack of integrity and knowledge, some ecclesial leaders and their followers abuse AI (Tagwirei, 2025). Shaw (2025) argues that Christians must be exemplary and use AI responsibly. We find this exhortation apt because Christians are supposed to be the salt and light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16), which means their behaviour must be exemplary; they must act in a way that is biblically and professionally ethical in order to transform society. Given the opportunity to prepare people for ministry in church and society,

> Christian educators themselves must become familiar with the appropriate and beneficial uses of AI, as well as its dangers and pitfalls. They should teach students to fact-check AI-generated content and require students to disclose when they use AI tools to maintain integrity … The value of theological education is not just the content the student produces but the kind of person the student is becoming. (Shaw, 2025)

In order to explore contextually feasible strategies that theology training can consider to contribute to nipping the ecclesiological abuse of AI in Zimbabwe in the bud, we start by overviewing the theoretical framework of the paper, understanding what AI is and reviewing the use and abuse of AI in the Church. To troubleshoot the misuse of AI, we then explore the interface of church leadership and technological development and suggest remedies, such as empowering trainees with Godly conviction and academic integrity and providing refresher courses to accommodate those already serving the church and who have limited or no AI literacy at all.

Theoretical Framework: Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology

This paper is based on the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT), which examines the acceptance of technology and suggests that adoption and use of technologies are determined by behavioural intention. According to Marikyan and Papagiannidis (2025), "the perceived likelihood of adopting the technology is dependent on the direct effect of four key constructs, namely performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions".

As Kittinger and Law (2024, p. 2) argue, studying technological issues must start with "the application of theoretical frameworks that provide a structured lens for understanding the complex processes involved". Therefore, we considered UTAUT as the framework for this paper because it integrates technological adoption and usage with personal and collective will; thus, if people intend to adopt and use AI responsibly, they can learn and work towards that goal. The UTAUT was developed by Viswanath Venkatesh, Michael Morris and Gordon Davis in 2003, as a

collaborative theory. The theory stands on four legs: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence and facilitating conditions, which are determined by the variables of age, gender, experience and voluntariness (Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2025). Essentially, the theory idealises the influence of these variables on technology adoption and usage (Kittinger & Law, 2024). In the context of ecclesiology, theology education and AI, the theory of UTAUT is apt because it offers common determinants according to which the adoption, use and abuse of AI can be reviewed.

This paper reviews the use and abuse of AI in Zimbabwe and explores how theology training can contribute to mitigating the predicament posed by AI. In doing so, we draw inspiration from Xue et al. (2024), who observe that UTAUT mirrors internal and external influences, which is applicable to AI abuse in ecclesiastic contexts. The dearth of information demands contextual studies. Before undertaking a contextual literature review, the next section conceptualises AI.

Methodology: Qualitative Literature Review

This paper employed a qualitative research design and literature review methodology. A literature review is an analytical survey of published literature in view of a topic that is under study. For this paper, we reviewed academic and non-academic publications on the interface of ecclesiology and AI. We decided to employ a qualitative literature review because it enables in-depth analysis and synthesis of existing literature, can provide important insights and expose different views and approaches to research (Hattangadi, 2021). When it is applied in emerging research, like this one, which interfaces the Church with AI, a literature review could enhance innovative engagement.

Snyder (2019) argues, “building your research on and relating it to existing knowledge is the building block of all academic research activities, regardless of discipline”. In our exploration of the (ab)use of AI in the Church, the literature review enabled us to engage with other researchers’ findings to cement our arguments and recommendations. Upon finding that contributions of theological institutions are scarce, yet pivotal in equipping church leaders for ministry, this paper suggests what theological training can do to help troubleshoot (ab)use of AI in ecclesial contexts in Zimbabwe.

Understanding Artificial Intelligence

In the early 21st century, faster processing power and larger datasets (“big data”) brought AI out of computer science departments and into the wider world (Copeland, 2025). While many people are fascinated by AI, few can explicitly explain what it is. AI is developing rapidly and producing novel and realistic content in all disciplines, to the extent that it can now imitate, produce, analyse and share texts, images, videos and other content (Tagwirei, 2025). Copeland (2025) explains that AI has the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings. AI was originally called AI by John McCarthy in 1956, who is considered to be the father of AI and it is defined as “the science and engineering of making machines that can perform tasks that would normally require human intelligence” (European Institute of Management & Technology, 2025). Stryker and Kavlakoglu (2025) define AI as technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem-solving, decision-making, creativity and autonomy.

There are different types of AI, such as narrow or weak AI, generative AI, strong AI and super AI, which are used differently. AI is rapidly transforming higher education, not simply technologically, but also culturally, ethically and institutionally, in ways that mean that the question is no longer

whether we will use AI, but whether we will guide its use with purpose, clarity and care (Georgieva & Stuart, 2025). It is believed that AI will have a transformative role in almost everything (Hussain et al., 2025). Lamentably, AI can be highly destructive if it is not managed well. Just as it can revolutionise teaching and learning (Kurata et al., 2025), AI can affect the Church and society positively and negatively.

In Zimbabwe, the government enacted the Cyber and Data Protection Act in 2021 in an attempt to manage the collection, processing and storage of data – sadly, personal data too (Gora, 2025). In addition, the Zimbabwean government recently approved the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy (2026–2030), which outlines the country's intention to harness AI positively by putting certain measures in place to manage its disruptive effects (Onyeagoro, 2025). As noted by Granic (2022, cited by Xue et al., 2024), there is a need to understand and strategize how AI can be adopted and used responsibly. For the sake of context, the following section reviews the use of AI in churches in Zimbabwe.

Reviewing the Use of AI in Churches in Zimbabwe

At this time, Church leaders and theologians are still exploring theological positions on the use of AI in ecclesiastic engagements, though AI is already being used by clerical leaders globally. While it used to be reserved for tech companies and research labs, AI is now becoming part of Church life. Some pastors and ministry leaders across denominations are discovering how generative AI tools, such as *ChatGPT*, can ease workloads, improve communication and free up time for what matters most: caring for people and advancing the mission of the Church. Some faith leaders are already using AI tools to write sermons and translate messages into local or foreign languages.

While some church leaders consider AI to be a blessing for their leadership, ministries and the church, others are worried that it may replace spiritual engagement.

> Some churches now use what is called a Content Management System (CMS) integrated with email marketing platforms like *hubspot*, *mailchimp* etc. … Many are also using chatbots on their websites and social media. These bots can answer questions like "What time is service?" or "How do I submit a prayer request?" all day and night. (Oluoje, 2025)

According to Oluoje (2025), some AI tools speak various languages, which makes them perfect for reaching a wider audience. Furthermore,

> There are also transcription tools powered by AI. These can take a pastor's sermon (audio or video) and turn it into text or short clips for social media postings. They can also put subtitles on videos for people watching from home. (Oluoje, 2025)

Startups such as Church AI now, Sermon Spark AI, and Christian AI offer services produced especially for churches. AI has also produced tools for writing and teaching. Eturralde (2025) reports that some gospel ministers and churches are using AI to write sermons, develop devotionals, or create theology content; "churches are 'overwhelmingly' using AI to assist with generating and editing emails, social media, and graphics and streamlining basic communication" (Eturralde, 2025).

In Africa, the "adoption of AI has been relatively slow compared to other regions, attributed to factors such as limited infrastructure, digital literacy, and funding" (Samasumo, 2024). In

Zimbabwe, the use of AI in the church is still low, mostly because of "limited technical knowledge, cultural disruptions and multiple economic constraints" (Tagwirei, 2025, p. 4). Nevertheless, a study by Chabata (2024) found that Church leaders in Zimbabwe found AI beneficial because it can process large amounts of scientific information by automatically collecting data from multiple sources, including published articles, books, databases, websites and other sources. Zimbabwean ecclesial leaders reported that AI helped them with biblical information and social analysis. The voices of evangelical church leaders in Zimbabwe affirm that AI is beneficial for them and the Church because it aids leadership and ministerial work:

> Many church leaders regard artificial intelligence as a viable tool for evangelism and outreach, capable of reaching a larger audience through targeted communication and digital channels. Churches have the ability to employ AI to improve their outreach efforts, give individualised spiritual content, and engage with communities in new ways. (Ministry Brands, n.d.)

During the last quarter of 2025, we observed that some church leaders and their congregations in Zimbabwe used *WhatsApp, Meta, Facebook, ChatGPT* and related AI tools to facilitate their discipleship, evangelism and communication. While there is no concrete statistics yet about the use and abuse of AI by the Church, Chabata (2024) reports that some church leaders in Zimbabwe use AI for hermeneutics, while others were ignorant about how to use AI. While the functions of AI promise thrilling results, as reported by Tagwirei (2025, p. 7), "three-quarters of interviewees indicated that they were still hesitant to adopt and use AI in their leadership and ministries in Zimbabwe due to limited knowledge, cultural disruptions and multiple economic constraints".

The church is challenged by unanswered questions such as the following: Can AI deliver the word of God? Can AI tools, which do not pray, fast or meditate, minister to souls effectively? The following section explores concerns of the Church, to seek solutions for Zimbabwe.

Reviewing the Abuse of AI in Church

It is notable that the swift development of AI has brought exciting benefits for the Church across the world. These benefits hold vast potential for ecclesiastic operations and services. A study by Tagwirei (2025) confirms that the adoption and use of AI in Zimbabwe is still very low because of a variety of factors, such as limited technical knowledge, cultural disruptions and economic constraints.

Globally, AI has sparked intense discussions and contrasting viewpoints in popular culture. Fleming (n.d.) reports that:

> some embrace it with entrepreneurial zeal, envisioning a future in which advanced technology enhances and revolutionizes every facet of our daily lives … Others approach AI with scepticism and fear, concerned we may be crossing technological boundaries that should not be trespassed.

Conversations within the Church surrounding AI have been equally polarised. Some church leaders actively embrace AI. They believe that using AI tools can help them get a great deal done with minimal resources. However,

> What if people start going to AI – instead of the Church – for answers to their deepest existential questions? What if AI advances so far that the line between human and machine becomes almost indistinct? At what point will people start to seek out AI for more than just information – even for intimacy – and how does that threaten the Christian worldview? (Fleming n.d.)

Thus, AI has the potential to transform many aspects of the Church but, regardless of how beneficial a new form of technology is, it can and likely will be corrupted when humans are involved. The greatest challenge is interfacing ecclesiology with generative AI. According to Miller (2023), "generative AI (i.e., algorithms that can generate text, images, code, videos, etc.) can do sermon research, create sermon graphics, generate small group questions, and write sermons, blogs, and podcast scripts". Miller (2023) explains that, consequently, ordinary Christians can bypass pastors and mentors (and Google, for that matter) when they have spiritual questions. Instead, they may ask an AI tool, which will happily dispense wisdom.

Despite the sophistication of AI, it remains a technology. Yet, the Church is the people of God, who must worship and share His word with divine and human engagements. AI can mimic, but can never be divine, or human. AI cannot pray, hear from God and share the word of God as humans can. Generative AI may be capable of writing (bland and conventional) sermons, but this is the scriptural duty of pastors. Neglecting this responsibility is not only unethical, it is also unwise.

> A machine – however advanced it may be – can't know the hearts of people in a congregation, so it can't responsibly calibrate its words to shepherd them toward the living truth they need to hear. It can't tune itself to the Holy Spirit who ought to guide our homiletic endeavours … The work of teaching God's Word is primarily a spiritual discipline and only secondarily an academic one. It's an act of wrestling with God through his Word in dependence on his Spirit. The goal isn't merely an insightful analysis but a word from the Lord for his people. An AI can assist with parts of the academic task, but it's categorically excluded from the prayerful, worshipful, Spirit-dependent reality of the process. (Chancey, 2025)

Furthermore, "quick, easy access to seemingly infinite information can hijack discipleship" (Chancey, 2025). Why would someone do the hard work of studying the Bible and engaging fellow believers and their pastors to grow in knowing God when AI can do it for them? We can appreciate the effectiveness by which AI can check spelling, undertake a Google search, navigate apps, operate rideshare apps, Siri, Alexa, voice-to-text, social media feeds, video games, facial recognition, spam filters, AI-coded apps, AI-automated shipping and logistics, do AI-assisted medical scans, and conduct AI warfare. However, AI cannot be, and cannot replace the divine and human being and engagements we need for the Church to be, and to remain the Church.

Another concern regarding the use of AI in church are deepfakes. According to Yasar et al. (n.d.), "Deepfake technology is a type of AI used to create convincing fake images, videos and audio recordings. The term describes both the technology and the resulting bogus content and is a portmanteau of deep learning and fake". In Romans 1:30, Paul describes mankind, left to its own devices, as "inventors of evil". "And because mankind is continually pursuing new ways to disobey God, the potential to use AI in ways displeasing to God is real and present" (Ryan, 2024). Ryan (2024) reports that, because AI technologies can be used to produce artificial videos, known as deepfakes, to purposefully deceive and mislead people, a malicious person using cutting-edge AI technology could film a person doing and saying potentially shocking things but then replace the

likeness of the original person with that of an influential political figure, celebrity, or other person for the express purpose of damaging their reputation or image. Deepfake AI technology has become so accurate and lifelike; it is often undetectable by the average person who is unfamiliar with the technology. It is not difficult to imagine the damage that could be done to a person, their family, or business if a deepfake video were to be produced depicting that person engaging in activity damaging to their reputation.

Furthermore, cultural disruptions are among the other concerns regarding the use of AI in churches. The Church has a culture of praying and fasting to seek divine inspiration, and spending time reading the Bible, researching and delivering work in person. “For these leaders, using AI to do hermeneutics and homiletics is a foreign idea and may disrupt local cultural operations” (Tagwirei, 2025). Tagwirei engaged with pastors and church leaders and uncovered that AI poses the danger of relaxing and limiting people’s divine and human engagements. It can blur human creativity, praying, fasting and fellowship, because people can access most of what they need through AI. Tagwirei (2025, p. 6) quotes a church leader who said that, “One of our youth leaders once used AI and presented information that was not biblically and contextually correct. Likewise, some of our leaders find information that they don’t understand and present it in a different context as it is”.

Conrad (2025, p. 10) explains other threats AI pose to the church: “data bias, the substitution of human relationships, the loss of nuance and critical thinking, the perpetuation of misinformation and ethical considerations in decision-making”. According to Conrad (2025), biblical study illustrates the human temptation to avoid personal responsibility, by asking God to intervene rather than to use the gifts of critical thinking, teamwork and compassion to solve problems and build community. Aspiring to a transhuman partnership with and relying on artificial super intelligence could lead to a further loss of agency.

While there are undeniable benefits to humankind to use the technical capabilities we have developed to improve life for humans, there is an equally undeniable acknowledgement that, when profitability and power are in play, the threats can outweigh the opportunities and, consequently, safety systems must be developed and put in place.

Interfacing Church Leadership with Technological Development

The development of AI suggests that it can optimise work in any context. However, the slow pace of the Church in adopting and using AI responsibly in Africa is not the result of the concerns elaborated on in the previous section, but mainly the result of ignorance. While AI can be used in the Church as a tool for research, data analysis, biblical hermeneutics, language translation, communication and other functions, the majority of church leaders in Africa, and in Zimbabwe, are still uninformed and ignorant about and untrained to use AI responsibly and effectively. In addition to church leaders possessing limited technical knowledge, cultural disruptions and multiple economic constraints also militate against the adoption and use of AI in Zimbabwe (Tagwirei, 2025, p. 4). Since the church cannot avoid AI, there is a need to seek leadership development with regard to AI; there is need for situational leadership development to achieve technological effectiveness in ministry. It should be noted that knowledge is one of the pivotal competencies that applies to African Christian leaders. According to Tagwirei (2024, p. 211), Christian leaders should develop their knowledge of God, the Bible, Christian theology and contexts in correspondence with their positions and locations. In this case, Church leaders cannot guide their congregations in the age of AI unless they understand AI, especially at the rapid pace that technologies are developing. While leaders continuously seek to know God, they should

continuously upgrade their technological knowledge, continue having conversations, evaluate ethical concerns, maintain biblical authority, embrace responsible uses of AI, engage in digital discipleship, lead with wisdom instead of fear and enhance ecclesiastic mission regardless of technological advances.

In all developments, contextualised education and development matters. While training cannot replace the significance of God's call and spiritual development, "it is believed that those who go through seminaries, Bible schools, theological colleges and universities get enlightened enough to research, interpret, teach, preach, and apply Scripture properly" (Tagwirei, 2023, p. 4). If church leaders misunderstand AI, they can eventually misuse and abuse it, promote the wrong theologies, and lead their congregations astray. So, yes, theology education does not guarantee ministerial effectiveness, because education is theoretical, while ministry is practical. That is why some uneducated and other less educated gospel ministers can do well in ministry, while some of the educated are failing. Nevertheless, several benefits of theological education, such as hermeneutical skills, leadership know-how, communication skills and philosophical empowerment cannot be nullified (Tagwirei, 2023, p. 5). Those who undergo biblical and theology training are generally enlightened and empowered enough to research, interpret, teach, preach, and apply scripture properly. Ephesians 4:11–16 and 2 Timothy 2:2 teach that training and education augments the work of ministry. In view of the abovementioned views, we argue that it is important for church leaders to undergo training in technology to serve the church and society with competence and integrity.

Empowering Trainees with Godly Conviction

The speedy, exciting and disruptive development and spread of AI can thrill, enhance or confuse church leaders if they are not and do not remain firm in God, and do not strive to achieve contextual relevance. It is commendable that theological colleges teach and instil conviction in trainee church leaders. Every theological institution must include in their integral curriculum the development of their students regarding spirituality, along with students' academic and ministerial formations. While most theological institutions prioritise academic formation, spiritual formation must be valued, facilitated and developed, to instil Godly conviction in students. Chapel services, Bible studies and discipleship must be integrated in theology training.

We are in agreement with Helm (2024), that "anyone who is going to teach the Bible needs real conviction that … the Bible is God's Word, prayer is a must, and the local church is one of God's greatest gifts". Generally, when people undergo theology training and Christian spiritual formation, they are transformed, to be like Jesus Christ. "Within the context of seminary programs, students may be formed spiritually alone and together as they study, converse, pray, worship, and serve" (Wang et al., 2023, p. 74). We argue that, when theology trainees undergo Christian spiritual formation, they will, eventually, gain maturity and conviction in Godly integrity, which will help them withstand the temptation to abuse AI. According to Wang et al. (2023, p. 74), Christian spiritual formation begets growth in various spiritual and ethical practices of everyday life. In this case, ecclesial leaders who undergo training can work with AI responsibly.

Empowering Trainees with Academic Integrity

To safeguard the church from AI abuse and prepare future ecclesial leaders for responsible ministry in the age of AI, we propose that theological colleges empower leaders with academic integrity. According to Scott (2023), integrity is a fundamental biblical concept and virtue that reflects honesty, moral uprightness and steadfast commitment to truthfulness. The Bible teaches

that integrity builds, while dishonesty destroys life (Proverbs 11:3); this notion is supported by Krejcir (2006). Although teaching integrity does not guarantee its application in ministry, because other graduates can still choose otherwise, some will apply what they learnt and serve ethically as the remnant to save the Church from abusing AI.

Research indicates that AI-driven education technologies enable students to access information in dynamic ways, improve their cognitive processing and create collaborative learning environments and positive personal experiences (Hussain et al., 2025; Jackson, 2024). Students who have been taught academic integrity can acknowledge sources and interpret, assess and use what is relevant and helpful to their contexts (Baba, 2024) without plagiarising and abusing AI.

We understand that curricula require regular review and updates; therefore, it is recommended that theological institutions advance, integrate and resource their research courses with AI and relevant ethics. As Georgieva and Stuart (2025) assert, understanding and observing contextual ethics determine effective interaction. If we bear in mind that AI is still developing, and its adoption and use in Zimbabwe is low, there is a need for theological institutions to invest in AI capacity building for their faculty and students. Matters relating to ethical discernment, strategic deployment and critical analysis need attention (Baba, 2024). Questions such as how AI can be integrated in human domains while destructive effects are minimised and infringement of ethics being is avoided can be answered through theology training (Kelly et al., 2023).

If theological colleges nurture a culture of academic integrity in their students, their products will not only be able to use AI productively, but they will remain committed to spiritual astuteness and will incorporate prayer, Bible study (2 Timothy 2:15), personal meditation, human fellowship and contextualisation in their practice. By doing so, theological institutions can contribute to mitigating AI abuse in churches, and can sustain the relevance of theological education in this rapidly changing world.

Empowering the Church with Refresher Training

It is clear that the demands of ministry work are changing as contexts change. In this age of AI, providing regular refresher training for church leaders is critical to ensure the sustainability, effectiveness and longevity of the church. According to Magezi et al. (2024, p. 8), “continuous training for leaders is a viable approach that the church can adopt to equip its leaders”. We agree with Lotich (2024) that continuous education can help church leaders remain relevant in a changing world, equip leaders to address modern issues with clarity and relevance, and ensure that their message resonates with members. Lotich (2024) adds that continuous education enhances leadership skills, provides opportunities to deepen knowledge, fosters and models a culture of lifelong learning, and inspires followers to do the same. In this context, we argue that theological colleges can and must initiate refresher training at least once per year for all church leaders. Such training can cover issues that are relevant at the time.

In this age of AI, such refresher training can include technological empowerment training for church leaders, to help them understand and use modern technologies for the good of the Church. Such training could enlighten ecclesial leaders about optimising their administration and holistic missionary engagements with the aid of AI. Consequently, church leaders are likely to enhance the relevance, vibrancy and impact of AI for the church and society.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the abuse of AI in churches can be mitigated by theology training. Without contextualised, updated and regular training, church leaders may fear, neglect or abuse AI out of ignorance. In contrast, if they are well informed and equipped, church leaders can use AI to effectively optimise their administration, research, ministries and related services. We conclude that, because theological institutions are entrusted to train ecclesial leaders before they are deployed to serve churches, these institutions must review their courses to ensure they foster Godly conviction in spiritual formation, integrity, AI and technological literacy. In attempts to cater for church leaders who entered ministry with limited training, or without any training, theology training can offer annual refresher courses that cover contextually relevant content that addresses contemporary issues with regard to which the Church requires edification. We argue that, if clerical leaders are enlightened and empowered, they can educate and empower their churches in turn. By contextualising, reviewing and updating theology courses to address contemporary concerns such as AI, theology training could upskill the leaders of churches in Zimbabwe to achieve effective, holistic missionary work, even beyond the nation, to fulfil reverse mission. This paper acknowledges that AI is still developing, and denominations are slow in adopting it in Zimbabwe. As such, this research was limited to a national ecumenical literature review. Thus, we recommend future studies to be contextualised from specific denominations.

References

Baba, S. O. Y. (2024, March 19). NBTS Ogbomosho on digital transformation theological education, artificial intelligence and societal transformation. https://www.academia.edu/122095934/Theological_Education_Artificial_Intelligence_and_Societal_Transformation

Chabata, L. (2024). Artificial intelligence and Afrocentric biblical hermeneutics crossroads in Zimbabwe (Col. 2:8). *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 80*(1), Article a10106. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.10106

Chancey, C. (2025, October 14). AI's usefulness and its dangers for preachers. *The Gospel Coalition*. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ai-usefulness-dangers-preachers/

Conrad, P. G. (2025). Opportunities and threats of artificial intelligence in Christian ministry: An interdisciplinary approach through the lens of scientific exploration and technology. *Religions, 16*, Article 1092. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16091092

Copeland, B. J. (2025). Artificial intelligence – Reasoning, algorithms, automation. *Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence

Dube, C.K. (2025, February 26). The future of artificial intelligence in Zimbabwe: Opportunities & challenges. *Medium.* https://medium.com/@kudadube/2025-the-future-of-artificial-intelligence-in-zimbabwe-opportunities-challenges-15cd8a976b48

Eturralde, J. (2025, July 9). AI in church operations shifts from early-adopter to mainstream. *Ministry Watch*. https://ministrywatch.com/ai-in-church-operations-shifts-from-early-adopter-to-mainstream/

European Institute of Management & Technology. (2025). *Who is the father of AI and machine learning?* https://www.eimt.edu.eu/who-is-the-father-of-ai-and-machine-learning

Fleming, S. (n.d.). AI and the Church: Possibilities and concerns. *Breeze.* https://www.breezechms.com/blog/ai-and-the-church-possibilities-and-concerns

Georgieva, M., & Stuart, J. (2025, June 24). Ethics is the edge: The future of AI in higher education. *EDUCAUSE Review*. https://er.educause.edu/articles/2025/6/ethics-is-the-edge-the-future-of-ai-in-higher-education

Gora, R. (2025, June 5). Zimbabwe's cyber law sets ground rules for AI deployment. *TechnoMag*. https://technomag.co.zw/zimbabwes-cyber-law-sets-ground-rules-for-ai-deployment/

Hattangadi, V. (2021). Why literature review is important in high quality research? *International Journal of Advances in Engineering and Management (IJAEM),* Volume 3, Issue 9, https://ijaem.net/issue_dcp/Why%20literature%20review%20is%20important%20in%20high%20quality%20research.pdf

Helm, D. R. (2024, August 14). 3 Convictions you need to have before you teach the Bible. *Crossway*. https://www.crossway.org/articles/3-convictions-you-need-to-have-before-you-teach-the-bible/?srsltid=AfmBOoqI4zYEe7ru_LoxRxal7Sg84VDgfg-nMWO2KxeyGBvyIjF5UiGJ

Jackson, E. A. (2024). The evolution of artificial intelligence: A theoretical review of its impact on teaching and learning in the digital age. *EconStor Preprints*, Article 280893. https://ideas.repec.org//p/zbw/esprep/280893.html

Kelly, S., Kaye, S.-A., & Oviedo-Trespalacios, O. (2023). What factors contribute to the acceptance of artificial intelligence? A systematic review. *Telematics and Informatics*, *77*, Article 101925. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2022.101925

Kittinger, L., & Law, V. (2024). A systematic review of the UTAUT and UTAUT2 among K-12 educators. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, *23*, Article 17. https://doi.org/10.28945/5246

Krejcir, R. J. (2006). The character of integrity. *Church Leadership.* http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=42531

Kurata, L., Ayanwale, M. A., Molefi, R. R., & Sanni, T. (2025). Teaching religious studies with artificial intelligence: A qualitative analysis of Lesotho secondary school teachers' perceptions. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, *8*, Article 100417. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100417

Lotich, P. (2024, December 10). Why continuing education is crucial for church leaders. *Smart Church Management*. https://smartchurchmanagement.com/church-leader-continuing-education/

Magezi, V., Moyo, I., & Nanthambwe, P. (2024). Need for continuous leadership training on sustainability of United Baptist Church of Zimbabwe. *In die Skriflig, 58*(1), Article a2987. https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.2987

Marikyan, D., & Papagiannidis, S. (2025). Unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT). In S. Papagiannidis (Ed.), *TheoryHub book*. https://open.ncl.ac.uk

Miller, P. (2023, July 20). Should we embrace or evict AI in churches?', *The Gospel Coalition.* https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ai-embrace-evict/

Ministry Brands (n.d.). AI and the Church: How it can be used, positive and negative impact. https://www.ministrybrands.com/church/management/ai-and-church

Hussain, M. M., Hanif, S., Ghauri, K., & Ain, Q. I. (2025). The role of behavioral intention in AI adoption and student success in higher education institutions: A UTAUT2 perspective. *Indus Journal of Social Sciences*, *3*(2), 341–357. https://doi.org/10.59075/ijss.v3i2.1221

Mutambara, A. (2025). The economics of AI: Prospects and possibilities for the Zimbabwean Economy -- ZES, Harare, Zimbabwe', *YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9po5o853wng

Oluoje, O. K. (2025, June 10). Digital pulpits: How AI is changing the way churches worship and work. *Business Day*. https://businessday.ng/opinion/article/digital-pulpits-how-ai-is-changing-the-way-churches-worship-and-work/

Onyeagoro, J. (2025, October 16).Zimbabwe approves National Artificial Intelligence Strategy for 2026-2030. TechAfrica News. https://techafricanews.com

Ryan, D. (2024, June 5). A Christian's perspective on artificial intelligence. *Christ Over All.* https://christoverall.com/article/longform/a-christians-perspective-on-artificial-intelligence/

Samasumo, P. (2024, April 16). Artificial intelligence (AI) and the Church of Africa: An interview with Fr Joel Nkongolo. *Vatican News*,, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2024-04/artificial-intelligence-ai-and-the-church-of-africa-an-interv.html

Scott, W. (2023). Walking in Truth: Embracing Integrity in the Christian Life. *Wisdom International*. http://www.wisdomonline.org/blog/integrity/?srsltid=AfmBOooguXov7nEvbmszPRXaI86mazUw-_FDYx85GC-OEQm5QngUP1RK

Shaw, D. M. (2025, May 19). Spiritual formation and artificial intelligence. Navigating academic integrity in the age of AI. *The Gospel Coalition*. https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/spiritual-formation-and-artificial-intelligence/

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines, *Journal of Business Research, 104*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039.

Stryker, C., & Kavlakoglu, E. (2025). What Is artificial intelligence (AI)? *IBM*. https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/artificial-intelligence

Tagwirei, K. (2023). Serving the needy from the greedy: Reviewing *Diakonia* in African neo-Pentecostalism. *In die Skriflig, 57*(1), Article a2981. https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v57i1.2981

Tagwirei, K. (2024). Developing African Christian Leaders for Global Transformation. *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies (ERATS)*, *10*(5). https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.20241057

Tagwirei, K. (2025). Acclimatising church leadership to the thrills and spills of artificial intelligence in Zimbabwe, *Theologia Viatorum, 49*(1), Article a331. https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v49i1.331

Wang, D., Reed, A., Greggo, S., Lauren, B., Drennan, A., Strawn, B., King, P. E., Porter, S. L., & Hill, P. C. (2023). Spiritual formation in theological education: A multi-case exploration on seminaries and student development. *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry*, *20*, 65–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/07398913231177722

Xue, L., Rashid, A. M., & Ouyang, S. (2024). The unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) in higher education: A systematic review. *SAGE Open*, *14*(1), Article 21582440241229570. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241229570

Yasar, K., Barney, N. & Wigmore, I., (n.d.). What is deepfake technology? *TechTarget*. https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/deepfake

Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*