What Do People Want out of AI? New Research Finds Pastors Want a Tool; Christians Want a Friend.

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Pastors and the people they lead want very different things from AI. Pastors are twice as likely as practicing Christians to want AI that is safe and transparent. Christians are three times as likely to want it to be compassionate and human-like.

BOULDER, Colo.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Nov. 17, 2026-- Nearly half of practicing Christians (48%) say they would trust AI with their spiritual growth. New research by Barna and Gloo (Nasdaq: GLOO) asks what they want it to sound like.

The research asked respondents to choose a voice, a theological perspective, and a set of qualities for AI in matters of faith.

Practicing Christians are about equally likely to want AI to take on the voice of a warm, inviting pastor (26%) or an objective, unopinionated observer (25%). Another 18% want a friend who understands them. Few want AI to claim authority: theologian (12%), coach or director (4%) and debater (1%).

“It’s clear they are less interested in AI acting like it has authority,” says Daniel Copeland, Vice President of Research at Barna. “44 percent say they want it as a ‘pastor’ or a ‘friend,’ indicating emotional warmth and trust.”

Pastors want something different. When choosing a preferred voice for AI, they lean toward an objective observer (28%). On desired qualities, pastors are about twice as likely as practicing Christians to choose safe (47% vs. 22%) and transparent (42% vs. 21%). Practicing Christians are about three times as likely to choose respectful (33% vs. 11%), compassionate (19% vs. 6%) and human-like (17% vs. 5%).

“Pastors are looking for a tool; Christians are looking for a friend,” says Copeland.

When it comes to theological perspective, practicing Christians were more decisive. If AI were to have an explicit perspective, they are more likely to select Christ-centered (35%) than any other perspective, including their own tradition (25%).

Christians have said how they want AI to talk with them about faith. Whether the models are listening is a separate question. As one step toward a solution, Gloo’s Flourishing AI Benchmark (FAI-Christian) is measuring how well leading AI models support human flourishing through a Christian worldview.

“People are turning to AI for moral reflection and decision-making. How the models answer matters, and you can’t shape what you haven’t measured,” says Brianne Shaw, Marketing Director at Gloo.

Learn more about the 2026 State of the Church initiative at gloo.com/stateofthechurch.

About Gloo

Gloo (Nasdaq: GLOO) is a leading technology platform serving the faith and flourishing ecosystem. Gloo helps missional organizations amplify their impact by powering their technology and expanding their reach, so that people flourish and organizations thrive. The company’s values-aligned AI platform modernizes systems, workflows and data, while its marketing and donor solutions expand reach, awareness and long-term giving for mission-based organizations.

About Barna Group

Since 1984, Barna Group has conducted more than two million interviews over the course of thousands of studies and has become a go-to source for insights about faith, culture, leadership, vocation and generations. Barna is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization.

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