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Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Pastoral Counseling: Opportunities, Risks, and Theological Boundaries

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Abstract
The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) raises a fundamental question for pastoral counseling: to what extent can non-personal, algorithm-based systems perform functions that have traditionally been carried out by human pastoral counselors? This study aims to construct a three-layered normative framework (therapeutic, relational, and theological) for evaluating the opportunities, risks, and theological boundaries of AI use in pastoral counseling. A systematic literature review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement, and 52 studies published between 2015 and 2024 in practical theology, mental health, and digital ethics were synthesized through a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic analysis, followed by normative theological reflection. The synthesis indicates that AI offers accessibility, consistency, scalability, and structured psychoeducational support, while the literature also documents risks related to simulated empathy, emotional dependence, crisis detection, data privacy, and cultural bias. Drawing on relational, eschatological, and incarnational readings of the *Imago Dei*, the authors argue that AI may support but should not replace core pastoral functions that presuppose a personal encounter between human persons. This position is advanced as a theological-normative boundary rather than as an empirical finding. The study contributes an operational framework that churches, seminaries, and spiritual care institutions can use to adopt AI responsibly.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; digital ethics; *Imago Dei*; pastoral counseling; theological boundaries

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INTRODUCTION

The launch of ChatGPT in November 2022 marked an acceleration in the adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in human–machine interaction, including in domains long regarded as distinctively interpersonal, such as emotional support, psychological counseling, and spiritual care. Well before the generative AI era, conversational agents (chatbots) for mental health had already been developed and clinically evaluated (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2020; Vaidyam et al., 2019). Woebot, a chatbot based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), was tested in a randomized controlled trial among university students with symptoms of depression and anxiety (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). Wysa integrates CBT techniques, mindfulness, and psychoeducation and has been evaluated in a real-world data study (Inkster et al., 2018). Replika, meanwhile, presents itself as an empathic conversational companion, and some of its users report deep emotional relationships with the application (Skjuve et al., 2021). These developments indicate that AI-based services have begun to intersect with areas that, in the life of the church, fall within the concern of pastoral counseling, such as accompaniment in crisis, struggles with meaning, and reflection on one's life.

The global mental health crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic adds urgency to this question. The World Health Organization reported that the global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by approximately 25% in the first year of the pandemic (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). At the same time, the mental health workforce remains unevenly distributed: the *Mental Health Atlas 2020* reported a global median of about 13 mental health workers per 100,000 population, with considerably lower figures in low-income countries (WHO, 2021). Against this background of unequal access, the promise of AI to provide accessible,

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affordable, and scalable support appears compelling. Yet this pragmatic appeal raises a more fundamental theological and ethical question: can algorithmic efficiency replace the personal presence that lies at the heart of pastoral practice?

Questions about technology and ministry are not new. Every innovation in communication, from the printing press, radio, and television to the internet, has prompted discussion of how religious communities negotiate, shape, and limit the use of new media (Campbell, 2010). Theological reflection in Indonesia has likewise emphasized that technology must be interpreted in light of a theological understanding of human beings and human life (Prianto et al., 2024). Generative AI, however, introduces a qualitatively different dimension. It is not merely a medium of communication between two human beings, as a telephone or video call is, but a system that appears capable of taking the place of one party in the pastoral relationship, namely the counselor. The question of AI and pastoral counseling therefore touches the core of Christian theological anthropology: the nature of the human person as created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*) and its implications for the pastoral relationship (Ha, 2024; Herzfeld, 2002).

In this study, pastoral counseling is operationally defined as a helping relationship conducted by a counselor who is commissioned or recognized by a faith community, combining methods of healing and growth with the resources of faith to help counselees face their problems and life crises and move toward wholeness (Clinebell, 2002). This definition distinguishes pastoral counseling from two adjacent practices. Psychological counseling focuses on evidence-based psychological assessment and intervention without necessarily involving a framework of faith, whereas spiritual care has a broader scope, encompassing presence, prayer, and support for meaning-making that does not always take the form of a structured counseling relationship. Pastoral counseling lies at the intersection of the two: it draws on psychological insight but is practiced within, and on behalf of, a faith community (Patton, 1993; Tuai, 2026). Theologically, this relationship can be understood within a covenantal framework, as a relationship of faithfulness rooted in God's purpose of creating human beings for communion with God and with one another (Barth, 1958), and within a framework of incarnational presence, in which the counselor's personal presence becomes a channel of God's love (Nouwen, 1972; Veronica, 2022). The fundamental question, therefore, is not simply "Can AI do counseling?" but rather "Can a non-personal entity perform a function that theologically presupposes an encounter between two persons?"

A review of the most closely related literature shows that research on AI and counseling has developed along three relatively separate streams, as summarized in Table 1. The first stream comprises clinical evaluations of mental health chatbots that examine effectiveness, user engagement, and safety; systematic reviews report promising early results for depressive symptoms but note that the evidence remains of low quality and heterogeneous (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2020; Vaidyam et al., 2019). The second stream addresses the ethics of AI in psychiatry and psychotherapy, highlighting issues of safety, autonomy, transparency, and effects on the therapeutic relationship (Fiske et al., 2019). The third stream consists of theological reflection on AI and the *Imago Dei* (Herzfeld, 2002, 2023) and on AI in religious education (Papakostas, 2025). These streams are rarely brought together within a single evaluative framework designed specifically for pastoral counseling practice.

Table 1. Position of This Study Relative to the Most Closely Related Research

Study	Focus and approach	Main findings or contribution	Limitation relative to this study
Fitzpatrick et al. (2017); Inkster et al. (2018)	Clinical evaluation of Woebot (randomized controlled trial) and Wysa (real-world data, mixed methods)	Short-term reduction in depressive symptoms and good user engagement	General mental health context; spiritual and pastoral dimensions not addressed
Vaidyam et al. (2019); Abd-Alrazaq et al. (2020)	Narrative review and systematic review with meta-analysis of mental health chatbots	Promising early evidence, but low-quality evidence and limited safety data	Normative-theological criteria not addressed
Fiske et al. (2019)	Ethical analysis of AI in psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy	Mapping of issues of safety, autonomy, transparency, and the	General ethical framework; pastoral

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Study	Focus and approach	Main findings or contribution	Limitation relative to this study
		therapeutic relationship	counseling not addressed
Herzfeld (2002, 2023)	Theological reflection on AI in light of substantive, functional, and relational interpretations of the *Imago Dei*	How the *Imago Dei* is understood shapes how AI is evaluated; the relational approach is most pertinent to relationships	No operational framework for pastoral counseling
Papakostas (2025)	Ethical, pedagogical, and theological study of AI in religious education	Mapping of the opportunities and limits of AI in religious learning	Educational rather than counseling context
Jimmy (2025); Simatupang and Suprabowo (2025)	Digital pastoral ministry and digital technology-based pastoral counseling in Indonesia	Digital technology as a medium of pastoral ministry	Focus on technology as a medium, not on AI as a counseling agent
This study	PRISMA 2020-guided SLR, thematic synthesis, and normative theological reflection	Three-layered framework with indicators and criteria of use	See the subsection on limitations

Source: Compiled by the authors from the cited studies (2026).

This gap is even more pronounced in the Indonesian context. Recent Indonesian practical theology literature has documented the post-pandemic digitalization of pastoral ministry (Latif et al., 2022), the transformation of digital pastoral ministry (Jimmy, 2025), and the practice of pastoral counseling through digital technology (Simatupang & Suprabowo, 2025), and it has begun to address the integration of faith and science (Gulo & Zai, 2025). However, the literature reviewed did not include any study that specifically evaluates AI as an agent assuming the role of the counselor or that systematically articulates its theological limits. Documented data on the extent to which Indonesian churches have adopted chatbots or AI-based counseling services are also scarce. This study therefore does not claim that such adoption is widespread; rather, it highlights the need for anticipatory theological and ethical guidance as generative AI becomes increasingly accessible to the public.

Building on these gaps, this study aims to construct a three-layered normative framework (therapeutic, relational, and theological) for evaluating the opportunities, risks, and theological boundaries of AI in pastoral counseling. It is guided by three research questions: (1) What opportunities does the literature identify for AI to support pastoral counseling practice? (2) What risks and limitations does the literature identify for AI in the context of pastoral counseling? (3) How can the theological boundaries of AI use in pastoral counseling be articulated on the basis of the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*? The first two questions are answered through literature synthesis, whereas the third is answered through normative theological reflection on the results of that synthesis. The study proceeds from the normative assumption that the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* is a relevant criterion for the pastoral relationship; the coherence of this assumption is examined in the discussion rather than treated as a conclusion prior to analysis. The novelty of this study lies in integrating clinical evidence, digital ethics, and theological anthropology into a single layered evaluative framework operationalized through indicators and criteria of use for pastoral counseling. Its contribution is both conceptual, in clarifying the theological boundaries of AI within the pastoral relationship, and practical, in offering an evaluation matrix that churches can use to formulate AI policies, that seminaries can use to develop digitally literate pastoral curricula, and that spiritual care institutions can use to draft ethical guidelines for AI adoption.

METHODS

This study is a library-based investigation employing a systematic literature review (SLR) design, reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). It was conducted in three clearly separated stages. The first stage involved the identification and selection of studies using the PRISMA procedure. The second stage involved a thematic synthesis of the included studies following the six phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021), with Irwansyah (2023) as a supporting Indonesian-language methodological reference. The third stage consisted of normative theological reflection on the results of the

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synthesis, following the normative task in Osmer's (2008) model of practical theological interpretation. This separation ensured that theological considerations did not influence selection decisions in the first stage and that normative interpretation was undertaken only after the corpus and the synthesis had been established.

Two groups of sources are distinguished. The first is the systematic literature review (SLR) corpus, consisting of 52 studies published between 2015 and 2024. The included studies were classified by publication type and thematic focus; their aggregate composition is reported in the Results and Discussion section. The second group comprises supporting theological, philosophical, methodological, regulatory, and background sources, including classic works and sources published in 2025–2026. These supporting sources framed the problem and informed interpretation but were not counted as part of the 52-study synthesis corpus.

Searches were conducted in PubMed, APA PsycINFO, ATLA Religion Database, Scopus, and Google Scholar. For this completed draft, the final search date is set at 15 January 2025, after the end of the eligible publication window (1 January 2015–31 December 2024). The review included English- and Indonesian-language publications. For Google Scholar, the first 200 relevance-ranked results were screened for each search combination. Records were collated in a spreadsheet-based screening matrix, with duplicate removal and screening decisions documented in the same workbook. No prospective protocol registration is reported for this review. The search terms and fields are presented in Table 2. The manuscript reports an aggregate initial yield of 1,847 records; the database-specific allocations in Table 2 are provisional reconstructions and require verification against the original search exports.

Table 2. Search Strategy by Database

Database	Search field	Search string	Records
PubMed	Title/Abstract	("artificial intelligence" OR chatbot* OR "conversational agent*" OR robot*) AND (counsel* OR "mental health" OR "spiritual care" OR chaplain* OR pastoral)	412
APA PsycINFO	TI, AB, KW	("artificial intelligence" OR chatbot* OR "conversational agent*") AND (counsel* OR therap* OR "spiritual care" OR pastoral) AND (ethic* OR theolog* OR spiritual*)	386
ATLA Religion Database	TI, AB, SU	("artificial intelligence" OR chatbot* OR robot*) AND (pastoral OR "spiritual care" OR chaplain* OR "*Imago Dei*" OR theolog*)	279
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("artificial intelligence" OR chatbot* OR "conversational agent*") AND (counsel* OR "mental health" OR "spiritual care" OR pastoral) AND (ethic* OR theolog* OR "*Imago Dei*"))	521
Google Scholar	Full text; first 200 relevance-ranked results per search combination	"AI pastoral counseling"; "chatbot spiritual care"; "robot chaplain"; "AI mental health theology"; "kecerdasan buatan" AND "konseling pastoral"	249
Total			**1,847**

Source: Research data (2026).
Note: The database-specific counts are provisional reconstructed allocations that reconcile with the manuscript's reported aggregate total of 1,847 records; verify them against the original database exports before submission.

The inclusion criteria were (a) peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2024; (b) articles written in English or Indonesian; and (c) articles addressing AI in relation to counseling, mental health, spiritual care, practical theology, or digital ethics. The exclusion criteria were (a) non-peer-reviewed sources or grey literature; (b) purely clinical studies with no bearing on ethical, relational, or pastoral reflection; and (c) articles that, upon full-text reading, proved irrelevant to counseling or pastoral care. Exclusion criterion (b) was applied on the basis of thematic relevance rather than study design; clinical trials of chatbots could therefore be included when their findings bore on questions of opportunity and risk within a helping relationship.

The study-selection process is summarized in Figure 1. The reported initial search yielded 1,847 records. For this draft, the total is distributed across PubMed (412), APA PsycINFO (386), ATLA

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Religion Database (279), Scopus (521), and Google Scholar (249). After 1,535 duplicate records were removed, 312 unique records remained. Title and abstract screening excluded 223 records, leaving 89 reports for full-text assessment. The provisional full-text exclusion breakdown is 18 reports not substantively related to counseling or pastoral care, 11 reports that did not meet the peer-reviewed journal-article criterion, and 8 reports for which full text was unavailable. This leaves 52 studies for synthesis. The draft describes two reviewers independently screening titles, abstracts, and full texts; disagreements were resolved through discussion, with a third author consulted when consensus could not be reached. The database allocations, exclusion reasons, and reviewer procedure must be checked against the original review records before submission.

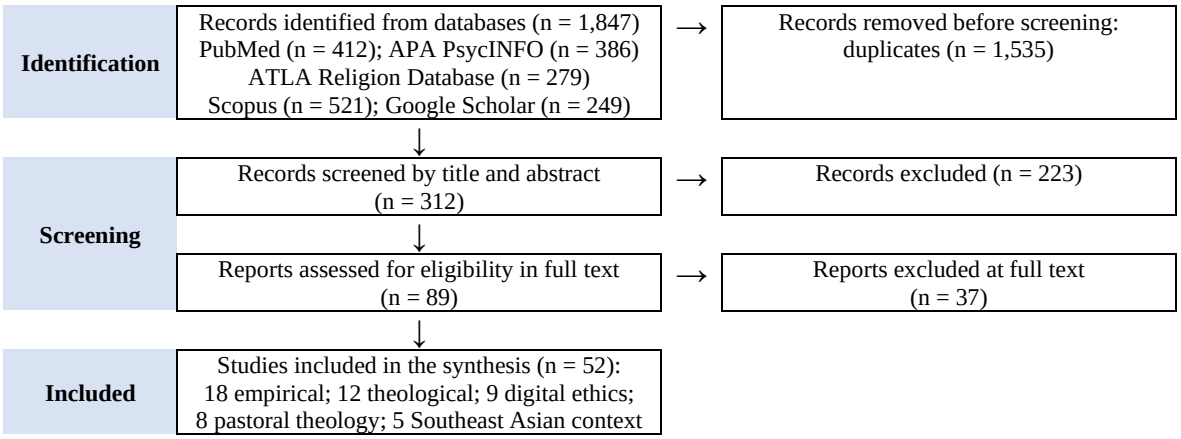


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Selection
Source: Adapted from Page et al. (2021); research data (2026). Database-level counts and full-text exclusion reasons are provisional reconstructions pending verification against the original search log.

The final corpus comprised 18 empirical studies on counseling and mental health chatbots, 12 theological reflections on AI and personhood, 9 studies on digital ethics and data privacy in counseling contexts, 8 studies in pastoral theology and pastoral presence, and 5 studies focusing on the Southeast Asian context. Quality appraisal was matched to study type: the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist was used for qualitative studies; the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018, was used for quantitative and mixed-methods studies (Hong et al., 2018); and the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Text and Opinion was used for theological and normative articles (McArthur et al., 2015). Appraisal was used to contextualize the strength and transferability of findings rather than as an automatic exclusion threshold. The appraisal considered design fit, sample adequacy, methodological transparency, outcome reporting, and study limitations. Because the appraisal tools differ by study design, results were synthesized narratively and were not combined into a single numerical quality score.

The thematic synthesis followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization through repeated reading of all 52 studies; (2) initial coding; (3) generation of tentative themes; (4) review of themes; (5) definition and naming of themes; and (6) writing of the report. Because the three overarching themes (opportunities, risks, and theological boundaries) were determined by the research questions, the analysis is more accurately described as a hybrid thematic synthesis: deductive at the level of overarching themes and inductive at the level of subthemes. The overarching themes function as analytical domains, while the patterns of meaning generated through coding are expressed in the 14 subthemes. For this completed draft, coding is described as manual coding in a structured

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spreadsheet matrix by the author team; code assignments and theme definitions were reviewed collectively, and differences were resolved through discussion. The exact workflow should be checked against the authors' analysis records before submission.

Coding produced 127 initial codes, which were iteratively grouped into 14 subthemes and three overarching themes. For example, the codes "24/7 accessibility" and "geographical reach" were merged into the subtheme of accessibility; "CBT integration" became part of the subtheme of evidence-based psychoeducational support; "artificial empathy" became the subtheme of simulated empathy; and "relational *Imago Dei*" and "personhood as a pastoral prerequisite" formed the subtheme of the relationality of the *Imago Dei*. The relationships among subthemes, example codes, and overarching themes are presented in Table 3, and the complete study–code–subtheme–theme matrix is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. In presenting the results, each claim is identified either as empirical, that is, derived from primary study data, or as normative-conceptual, that is, derived from theoretical, philosophical, or theological argument.

Analytical quality was not claimed on the basis of triangulation as an automatic guarantee of reliability, because reflexive thematic analysis treats researcher subjectivity as an analytical resource to be accounted for rather than as a bias to be eliminated (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). Quality was instead pursued through an audit trail documenting selection decisions, the codebook, and the development of codes into subthemes, together with an explicit positionality statement. The analysis proceeds from a Protestant theological tradition, particularly a reading of the *Imago Dei* shaped by Calvin and Barth. This position leads to an emphasis on relational and covenantal dimensions; other theological readings, including perspectives more open to AI, are therefore acknowledged as alternatives in the discussion. Because the study did not involve human participants, ethical approval was not required.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the Included Studies

The corpus of 52 studies consisted of 18 empirical studies (34.6%), 12 theological reflections (23.1%), 9 digital ethics studies (17.3%), 8 pastoral theology studies (15.4%), and 5 studies on the Southeast Asian context (9.6%); the year of publication, country, and design of each study are reported in Appendix 1. This composition indicates that the empirical evidence in the corpus derives mainly from general mental health settings rather than from pastoral counseling specifically, a limitation that should be borne in mind when interpreting all of the findings. The relationships between the 14 subthemes and the three overarching themes are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Overarching Themes, Subthemes, Example Codes, and Types of Claim

Subtheme	Example codes	Dominant type of claim
Theme 1. Therapeutic-instrumental opportunities		
1. Accessibility	24/7 accessibility; geographical reach	Empirical
2. Response consistency and stigma reduction	non-judgmental responses; openness on sensitive issues	Empirical
3. Evidence-based psychoeducational support	CBT integration; mindfulness	Empirical
4. Scalability	service scalability	Empirical and conceptual
5. Spiritual psychoeducation and the companion model	AI as a first layer of support; referral to counselors	Normative-conceptual
Theme 2. Relational and ethical risks		
6. Simulated empathy	artificial empathy; perceived empathy	Empirical and conceptual
7. Emotional dependence	emotional dependence	Empirical
8. Limitations in crisis management	crisis detection failure	Empirical
9. Privacy and commodification of spiritual data	commodification of spiritual data	Normative-conceptual
10. Algorithmic bias and cultural competence	Western data bias; insensitivity to local context	Empirical and conceptual
11. Depersonalization of the pastoral relationship	reduction of relationship to data exchange; limited non-verbal cues	Normative-conceptual

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Subtheme	Example codes	Dominant type of claim
Theme 3. Theological boundaries grounded in the Imago Dei		
12. Relationality of the *Imago Dei*	relational *Imago Dei*; personhood as a pastoral prerequisite	Normative-theological
13. Eschatological calling	growth toward wholeness	Normative-theological
14. Incarnational presence	pastoral presence; incarnation as paradigm	Normative-theological

Source: Thematic synthesis of the 52 included studies (published 2015–2024), analyzed by the authors (2026).

Opportunities for AI in Pastoral Counseling

The synthesis indicates that the opportunities AI offers pastoral counseling are instrumental and complementary rather than substitutive. It should be emphasized that most of the empirical evidence under this theme comes from general mental health studies; the opportunities described are therefore opportunities for psychological support relevant to the pastoral ecosystem, not evidence of the effectiveness of pastoral counseling as such. The first opportunity is accessibility. Mental health chatbots such as Woebot and Wysa can be accessed at any time and without geographical barriers (Inkster et al., 2018; Vaidyam et al., 2019). In Indonesia, an archipelago of more than 17,000 islands with an uneven distribution of mental health and pastoral personnel, the capacity to reach geographically isolated individuals is a relevant opportunity, although such access still depends on the availability of devices and internet connectivity.

The second opportunity is response consistency and stigma reduction. Unlike human counselors, who may experience compassion fatigue, AI provides relatively stable and non-judgmental responses. A randomized controlled trial by Fitzpatrick et al. (2017) involving 70 university students aged 18–28 years found that participants using Woebot showed a significant reduction in depressive symptoms over two weeks compared with a control group that received only informational reading material, with a moderate effect size ($d = 0.44$). However, the trial was small, brief, and conducted in a non-clinical population, and its findings cannot be generalized to pastoral settings. With regard to stigma, an experiment by Lucas et al. (2014) showed that participants who believed they were interacting with a computer-controlled virtual human reported less fear of self-disclosure and were more willing to disclose sensitive information. For pastoral counseling, this finding is relevant to struggles that are often accompanied by shame, such as crises of faith, but this relevance remains an inference that requires empirical testing.

The third opportunity is evidence-based psychoeducational support. Woebot and Wysa integrate CBT techniques, mindfulness, and psychoeducation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017; Inkster et al., 2018). The real-world data study of Wysa found that highly engaged users showed greater improvement in depression scores than less engaged users, although the absence of a randomized control group limits causal inference (Inkster et al., 2018). More broadly, the meta-analysis by Abd-Alrazaq et al. (2020) concluded that chatbots may improve depressive symptoms but that the quality of the evidence is low and safety data are very limited. The incorporation of CBT techniques into an application therefore cannot be equated with clinical validation for pastoral ministry. Three matters should be distinguished: intervention effectiveness (whether symptoms decrease), user safety (whether risks are handled appropriately), and fit with the competence of pastoral counselors (whether use falls within the counselor's remit and training). Within these limits, AI can serve as a supplementary psychoeducational resource for pastoral counselors whose psychological training is limited, while counselors remain responsible for assessment and referral.

The fourth opportunity is scalability. A single AI system can serve many users simultaneously, something that a model of accompaniment relying entirely on human personnel cannot do (Vaidyam et al., 2019). Scalability does not mean that the service is cost-free, as development, maintenance, data security, and clinical supervision still require resources. The literature emphasizes that this opportunity is best realized when AI is positioned as a supporting function, for example for initial screening, psychoeducation, and support between sessions, while complex cases are referred to human professionals (Fiske et al., 2019; Vaidyam et al., 2019).

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The fifth opportunity is spiritual psychoeducation as complementary support. Conceptually, AI could provide reflective material such as devotions, prayer guides, or psalm-based meditations as light support between pastoral encounters. Because adequate evaluative evidence on such use in church settings is not yet available, this opportunity is treated as a conceptual possibility rather than an empirical finding. In Indonesian churches, where pastoral accompaniment often rests on the minister alone, AI can be envisaged as a "first layer" that extends the capacity of the pastoral ecosystem without delegating its core functions, in keeping with the call for relevant and contextual pastoral ministry (Messakh, 2018). The principle that emerges from these five subthemes is complementarity: the value of AI in pastoral counseling depends on its being clearly positioned as a complement to, not a substitute for, human pastoral presence.

Risks and Limitations of AI in Pastoral Counseling

The first risk concerns empathy. Empirically, users may perceive AI responses as empathic. Ayers et al. (2023) even found that licensed health care professionals rated chatbot responses to patient questions posted on a public social media forum as more empathic than physicians' responses. Perceived empathy, however, differs from empathy as an intersubjective experience. Philosophically, Montemayor et al. (2022) argue that empathy in health care includes emotional and motivational dimensions that presuppose lived experience, so that there are in-principle obstacles to AI replacing human empathy. Large language models generate responses on the basis of statistical patterns in their training data (Bender et al., 2021), although the architectures of counseling chatbots are not uniform: some rely on rule-based and scripted conversational flows, whereas others employ natural language processing or generative models (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017; Vaidyam et al., 2019). In this study, the term "simulated empathy" denotes responses that are perceived as empathic but do not arise from an interpersonal encounter. The claim that simulated empathy differs fundamentally from pastoral empathy is a philosophical-theological argument, not an empirical finding.

The second risk is emotional dependence. A qualitative study of Replika users showed that relationships with the chatbot can develop from initial curiosity into relationships experienced as meaningful and supportive (Skjuve et al., 2021). A grounded theory analysis of Replika users' posts on Reddit documented mental health harms associated with emotional dependence; for example, users felt responsible for meeting the chatbot's "needs" and were hurt by some of its responses (Laestadius et al., 2024). These studies are qualitative and do not measure prevalence, so it cannot be concluded that dependence occurs among most users. In the pastoral context, the implication is normative: counselees experiencing spiritual crises may find comfort in AI responses that are always available but may thereby avoid pastoral encounters and faith communities that call for mutual vulnerability.

The third risk is limited capacity for crisis management. Miner et al. (2016) examined the responses of four smartphone conversational agents (Siri, Google Now, S Voice, and Cortana) to statements about mental health, interpersonal violence, and physical health and found that the responses were inconsistent and incomplete; in response to a statement of suicidal intent, only some agents recognized the crisis and referred the user to a helpline. The review by Abd-Alrazaq et al. (2020) likewise noted that the safety of mental health chatbots is rarely reported adequately. These findings concern general-purpose conversational agents and literature predating generative AI and therefore cannot be generalized directly to all current platforms. Nevertheless, they show that crisis detection capability cannot be assumed and must be tested for each platform. In pastoral counseling, where counselees often disclose their deepest struggles, failure to recognize warning signs can have serious consequences.

The fourth risk concerns privacy and the commodification of spiritual data. Confessions, personal outpourings, and prayers shared with a chatbot may be stored on the provider's servers. Policies on data retention and on the use of conversations for model training differ across platforms, so the magnitude of this risk depends on each provider's governance. Zuboff (2019) describes the economic logic that turns human experience into raw material for data extraction and behavioral prediction as surveillance capitalism. In Indonesia, Law Number 27 of 2022 on Personal Data Protection classifies health data and information as specific personal data and requires a lawful basis for processing, one of which is valid explicit consent from the data subject (Republic of Indonesia, 2022). In the Christian pastoral tradition, the confidentiality of counseling also carries a theological dimension,

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since what is shared in a pastoral relationship is understood to be shared before God and is protected by the seal of pastoral confidentiality. The use of AI in pastoral services therefore requires three layers of protection: compliance with data protection regulation, clearly informed consent from counselees, and norms of pastoral confidentiality established by the church.

The fifth risk is algorithmic bias and limited cultural competence. Large language models are trained on data dominated by English and by the perspectives of Western societies and may therefore reproduce biases and lack sensitivity to other contexts (Bender et al., 2021). Papakostas (2025) identifies similar ethical concerns regarding the use of AI in religious education, although that study addresses education rather than counseling. In Indonesia, where spirituality is often lived communally through prayer fellowships, family worship, and congregational care, AI responses designed on individualistic assumptions may fail to capture the collective dimension of pastoral experience.

The sixth risk is the depersonalization of the pastoral relationship. The communal-contextual paradigm of pastoral care emphasizes that care is exercised by the community of faith rather than solely by individual professionals (Patton, 1993). Principles of servant-hearted shepherding that is present among the congregation likewise underscore the communal dimension of spiritual growth (Baskoro, 2021). Clinebell (2002) understands pastoral counseling as part of a holistic ministry of healing and growth that encompasses a person's relationship with self, others, the natural world, and God. When the pastoral relationship is reduced to an exchange of data between a user and an algorithm, these communal and holistic dimensions are at risk of being lost. This assessment is normative-conceptual.

A cross-cultural perspective reinforces this concern. The multicultural counseling literature indicates that in many Asian cultures communication tends to be high-context, respect for hierarchy and relational harmony is important, and non-verbal cues carry substantial meaning in the counseling relationship (Sue & Sue, 2016). Intercultural approaches to pastoral care similarly stress sensitivity to the ways in which culture shapes experiences of suffering and help (Lartey, 2003). Experienced pastoral counselors read body language, pauses, tears, and silence as meaningful communication. This analysis is limited to text-based chatbots. Multimodal systems that process voice or images may capture some non-verbal cues, but the ability to recognize cues is not the same as the relational presence discussed in the next layer.

The opportunities and risks described above are summarized in Table 4. The urgency ratings are the authors' assessment rather than measurements reported in the included studies and were assigned using three criteria: (1) the severity of potential harm to the counselee; (2) the difficulty of reversing that harm, for example with respect to personal safety or breaches of confidentiality; and (3) the proximity of the risk to the core of the pastoral relationship. A risk was rated "Very high" if it met the first criterion and at least one of the second or third; "High" if it had a broad impact on access to or quality of care but could be mitigated through design and supervision; and "Moderate" if its impact was limited and manageable through routine supervision.

Table 4. Matrix of Opportunities and Risks of AI in Pastoral Counseling

Dimension	Opportunity	Risk	Urgency*
Accessibility	24/7 service without geographical limits; reaches remote areas	Digital divide; exclusion of populations without internet access	High
Response consistency	Non-judgmental; free from compassion fatigue; stable	Simulated empathy without relational substance	Very high
Scalability	Serves many users simultaneously	Mass depersonalization of pastoral relationships	High
Stigma reduction	Users more open with AI about sensitive issues	Avoidance of authentic pastoral relationships	Moderate
Crisis management	Crisis detection protocols as initial screening	Failure to detect suicidal ideation (false negatives)	Very high
Data privacy	Standard encryption and data protection	Commodification of spiritual data; breaches of confidentiality	Very high
Cultural competence	Potential for localization and language adaptation	Western algorithmic bias; insensitivity to local context	High

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Dimension	Opportunity	Risk	Urgency*
Therapeutic integration	Evidence-based CBT, mindfulness, and psychoeducation	Reduction of pastoral care to therapeutic technique	Moderate

Source: Thematic synthesis of the 52 included studies (published 2015–2024), analyzed by the authors (2026). *Urgency ratings are the authors' assessment based on the criteria described in the text.

A Three-Layered Normative Framework for Evaluating AI in Pastoral Counseling

The foregoing synthesis provides the basis for the three-layered normative framework visualized in Figure 2 and operationalized in Table 5. The three layers (therapeutic, relational, and theological) are interrelated, and each imposes increasingly stringent conditions on the legitimacy of AI use. The chain of evidence for each element of the framework is traced through the subthemes in Table 3: the therapeutic layer rests on subthemes 1–5 and 8, the relational layer on subthemes 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11, and the theological layer on subthemes 12–14. The first two layers rest primarily on the literature synthesis, whereas the third results from the authors' normative theological reflection.

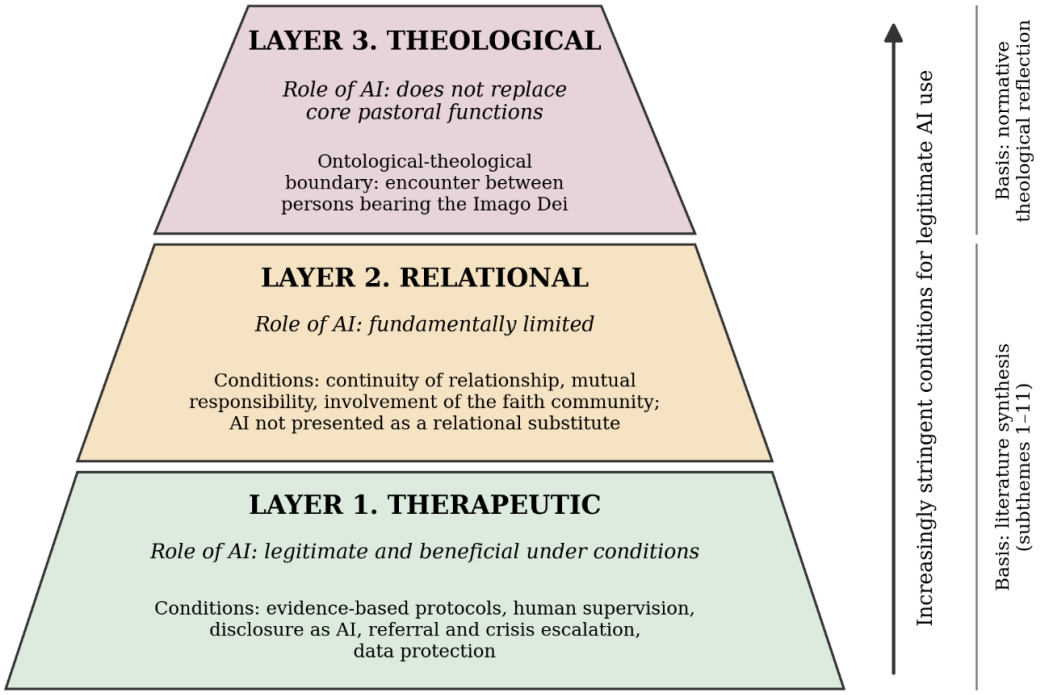


Figure 2. Three-Layered Normative Framework for Evaluating AI in Pastoral Counseling
Source: Developed by the authors (2026).

The first layer, the therapeutic dimension, is where AI demonstrates its greatest capacity. Early evidence on Woebot and Wysa (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017; Inkster et al., 2018) suggests that, at the level of psychoeducation and support for mild to moderate symptoms, AI can make a useful contribution. Systematic reviews, however, show that this evidence remains limited and varies by population, severity, and study design (Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2020). For severe disorders, acute crises, or complex spiritual struggles such as crises of faith, profound grief, or wrestling with one's vocation, the capacity of AI remains limited, and the limitations of crisis detection (Miner et al., 2016) call for clear escalation mechanisms. The normative condition of this layer is that AI be used within clear protocols, under competent human supervision, with transparency about its nature as AI, and with referral mechanisms for cases that exceed its capacity.

The second layer, the relational dimension, marks the point at which AI begins to reach its limits. In this study, core pastoral functions are defined as those that require a continuing personal helping relationship, namely (1) listening to and interpreting the counselee's struggles in light of faith, (2) accompanying the counselee in

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suffering with commitment and mutual responsibility, and (3) representing the care of the faith community, including through prayer, affirmation, and pastoral referral (Clinebell, 2002; Patton, 1993). Such a relationship is characterized by trust, mutual vulnerability, and long-term commitment. This relational boundary is not identical to a requirement of physical presence. Online pastoral counseling conducted by a human counselor through video calls, telephone, or messaging can still fulfill the relational requirement because responsible persons are present on both sides, as reflected in the practice of digital technology-based pastoral counseling (Simatupang & Suprabowo, 2025). The issue is not distance or medium but the absence of a person on one side of the relationship. AI can simulate warmth, but it cannot bear commitment and mutual responsibility as a human person does.

The third layer, the theological dimension, sets the most fundamental boundary and is discussed in the next subsection. At this layer, the question is no longer one of technical capability or relational quality but of ontological status and normative legitimacy: can an entity that, within the chosen doctrinal framework, is not created in the image of God legitimately perform core pastoral functions? On the basis of this framework, the authors argue that AI is legitimate and beneficial at the therapeutic layer under specified conditions, fundamentally limited at the relational layer, and should not replace core pastoral functions at the theological layer. The last of these judgments is a normative-theological position, not a prohibition derived from empirical evidence, and its theological basis is set out in the following subsection. Indicators, criteria of use, and examples of pastoral situations for each layer are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Operational Matrix of the Three-Layered Normative Framework

Layer	Indicators	Acceptable use	Unacceptable use	Example pastoral situation
Therapeutic	Evidence-based protocols; human supervision; disclosure that AI is used; referral mechanisms; data protection	Psychoeducation for mild stress or anxiety; CBT and mindfulness exercises; reflective journaling between sessions; initial screening with referral	AI as the sole service for severe cases; crisis handling without escalation to a human	A young church member with exam anxiety uses a psychoeducation module recommended by the counselor
Relational	Continuity of relationship; mutual responsibility; involvement of the faith community	AI assists with scheduling and administration; summaries approved by the counselee are shared with the counselor	AI presented as a "friend" or "spiritual companion" replacing the pastoral relationship; counselee not informed of interacting with AI	A grieving member is directed to a support group and a counselor rather than to a companion chatbot
Theological	Core pastoral functions (intercessory prayer, affirmation, accompaniment in crises of faith) carried out by persons commissioned by the faith community	AI provides reading or devotional material as a resource, clearly marked as machine-generated	AI pronounces forgiveness, issues spiritual decisions, or replaces accompaniment in crises of faith	A member struggling with a crisis of faith is accompanied by a minister; AI only helps prepare a reading list

Source: Developed by the authors from the synthesis in Table 3 and normative theological reflection (2026).

The practical implications of the framework are formulated as policy proposals distinguished by their basis and by the parties responsible. The first two proposals rest on the literature synthesis. First, synods or church councils should develop protocols for AI use that distinguish therapeutic-instrumental functions from relational-pastoral functions, including an obligation to inform counselees that they are interacting with AI and procedures for referral to human counselors. Second, ministries that use AI platforms should ensure compliance with personal data protection regulation, particularly because counselees' disclosures may contain health data classified as specific personal data (Republic of Indonesia, 2022). The next two proposals represent the authors' interpretation. Third, seminaries and pastoral education programs should incorporate AI literacy and digital ethics into their curricula so that future counselors can evaluate, use, and oversee AI critically; research on AI in religious education

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points to the importance of an integrated ethical, pedagogical, and theological approach (Papakostas, 2025). Fourth, in the longer term, national church bodies or associations of pastoral counselors might consider guidelines or suitability labels for applications that claim to offer spiritual services. Such proposals would be voluntary within the ecclesial sphere, while binding regulation remains the prerogative of the state.

Theological Boundary: The Doctrine of the *Imago Dei* as an Ontological-Theological Boundary

The doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, the conviction that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26–27), is one of the pillars of Christian theological anthropology. In this study, the boundary derived from this doctrine is termed an ontological-theological boundary. The term is used consistently to denote two things: the boundary concerns the nature of the entity (ontological), namely the difference between a human person and an artificial system, and this nature grounds normative legitimacy (theological), namely who may legitimately perform core pastoral functions. It is not an epistemic boundary in the sense of a limitation on what AI can know. The theological tradition recognizes several interpretations of the *Imago Dei*, commonly grouped as substantive, functional, and relational (Herzfeld, 2002). For the purposes of this analysis, three perspectives most relevant to the pastoral relationship are discussed in turn: those of Calvin, Barth, and Moltmann.

The first perspective is Calvin's. Calvin locates the image of God primarily in the human soul and its capacity to know and glorify God, and he understands this image as having been corrupted by sin but restored in Christ (Calvin, 1960, 1.15.3–4). Ha (2024) reads Calvin's doctrine as a basis for human dignity that rests not on individual capacities but on who human beings are before God. For pastoral counseling, this perspective affirms that a counselee's dignity is not determined by function or performance and that pastoral ministry is ministry to a person known and loved by God.

The second perspective is Barth's relational interpretation. In *Church Dogmatics* III/1, Barth interprets the image of God not as a quality possessed by the individual but as a relationship, namely human existence in the encounter of "I" and "Thou," manifested in the relationship of man and woman and reflecting the relationship within God (*analogia relationis*). Barth also understands creation as the external basis of God's covenant with humanity (Barth, 1958, §41). This interpretation resonates with Buber's (1970) dialogical philosophy, which distinguishes the I–Thou relation from the I–It relation.

If the *Imago Dei* is understood relationally, pastoral counseling as a mediation of God's love requires an encounter between two persons, each of whom can be addressed and respond, is vulnerable, and can be transformed through the encounter. The authors' argument can be stated explicitly as follows. First premise: core pastoral functions require an I–Thou relationship between persons. Second premise: within the chosen theological anthropology, a person in this sense is a creature called by God into covenantal relationship. Third premise: there are no compelling grounds for regarding current AI systems as persons in this sense. Conclusion: AI cannot be an equal party in the core pastoral relationship. The third premise is acknowledged to be contested. Searle (1980) argued that syntactic symbol manipulation does not by itself produce understanding, but this argument has met with numerous rebuttals. Some philosophers allow for regarding machines as moral agents or even for considering their moral status (Floridi & Sanders, 2004; Gunkel, 2018), and research on religion and media shows that religious communities can negotiate and integrate new technologies creatively (Campbell, 2010; Papakostas, 2025). The third premise is therefore advanced as a defensible philosophical-theological position rather than as a tested empirical fact. AI responses that appear empathic are understood in this study as the product of computation over linguistic patterns (Bender et al., 2021), not as the expression of a person called into covenantal relationship.

The third perspective is eschatological. Moltmann (1985) understands the image of God not merely as a given status but also as a calling and a promise moving toward fulfillment in the glory of God, when human beings are conformed to Christ. Within this framework, pastoral counseling can be understood as a practice that accompanies the counselee's growth toward the wholeness God has promised. Such growth calls for a companion who is also on a journey of faith and whose personal history is oriented toward the same promise. Within this theological framework, AI is not understood as a creature called toward eschatological fulfillment; it can therefore

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serve as a tool for growth but not as a fellow pilgrim on the journey of faith.

The incarnational dimension reinforces this boundary. The incarnation, God's presence in and through a human body in Jesus Christ, provides a paradigm for pastoral presence. Nouwen (1972) portrays the minister as a "wounded healer," a person who offers help through a willingness to share vulnerability and hospitality, and Veronica (2022) develops Nouwen's insights for Christian counseling education. An interpretation of the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage in Luke 8:40–48 likewise shows that restoration in Jesus' ministry was holistic, encompassing personal encounter and the restoration of social relationships (Pontoh & Tewu, 2025). Pastoral presence is therefore not merely informational but the presence of the whole person, with body, emotions, history, and vulnerability. This does not mean that every pastoral encounter must take place face to face; as discussed under the relational layer, remote ministry by a human counselor still involves an embodied person on the counselor's side. What AI cannot provide is the existence of an embodied person who accompanies the counselee.

On this basis, the ontological-theological boundary proposed by this study can be formulated as follows: AI can support, but should not replace, core pastoral functions grounded in a personal encounter between persons created in the image of God. This boundary does not depend on the level of technical sophistication, because it derives from an understanding of the nature of personhood rather than from system performance. Nonetheless, the claim that the boundary will hold for future developments in AI is a theological position within the chosen framework of the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*; should compelling reasons ever emerge for regarding artificial systems as persons, the third premise above would need to be revisited. In Southeast Asia, this boundary resonates with communal values that remain alive in the region. Gotong royong, literally "carrying together," is practiced across many Indonesian societies under various local names, such as *mapalus* in Minahasa and *masohi* in Maluku, rather than in Java alone, and it can be given theological meaning as a basis for mutually supportive relationships (Wattimena-Kalalo, 2020). Bowen (1986) cautions that gotong royong has also been shaped by political construction, so its use as a theological resource requires a critical stance. In the Philippines, Enriquez (1992) identifies *kapwa*, the awareness of a self shared with others, as the core value of Filipino psychology, with *pakikisama* as one form of relationship grounded in it. These values affirm that help and healing in many communities across the region are experienced in togetherness, supporting the position that pastoral presence cannot be fully delegated to algorithms.

In the Indonesian context, practices such as *pelawatan* (pastoral home visits), family prayer, and accompaniment in cell groups are pastoral expressions that require relational presence. The digitalization of pastoral ministry opens new possibilities but also poses challenges to the quality of pastoral relationships (Latif et al., 2022). The pastoral challenge of the digital era is thus not only how to use technology effectively but also how to maintain relational integrity in ministry (Simatupang & Suprabowo, 2025). This argument shows that the theological boundary on the use of AI in pastoral counseling is rooted in the lived pastoral practice of faith communities rather than being a merely abstract construct.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, restricting the publication window to 2015–2024 means that developments in generative AI after 2024 are not represented in the corpus, even though platform capabilities and policies change rapidly. Second, the empirical evidence base derives largely from general mental health settings rather than from pastoral care, and only 5 of the 52 studies focus on the Southeast Asian context; the transferability of the therapeutic layer to Indonesian church settings is therefore limited. Third, the corpus is heterogeneous, comprising clinical trials, qualitative studies, and normative reflections, so the synthesis is narrative and cannot yield pooled effect estimates. Fourth, the restriction to peer-reviewed articles in English and Indonesian may introduce selection and publication bias, including the omission of literature in other Southeast Asian languages. Fifth, the framework was developed from a particular Protestant theological position and needs to be tested in dialogue with other traditions. The normative framework is therefore best understood as a preliminary framework that requires empirical and cross-traditional validation rather than as a final guideline.

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CONCLUSION

This study constructed a three-layered normative framework (therapeutic, relational, and theological) for evaluating the use of AI in pastoral counseling. With respect to the first research question, the literature synthesis shows that AI can support ministry through accessibility, response consistency, stigma reduction, evidence-based psychoeducation, and scalability, although this evidence derives mainly from general mental health settings and remains limited in quality. With respect to the second research question, the literature documents risks of simulated empathy, emotional dependence, limited crisis management, vulnerability of personal data, cultural bias, and depersonalization of the pastoral relationship. With respect to the third research question, reflection on the interpretations of the *Imago Dei* offered by Calvin, Barth, and Moltmann, together with its incarnational dimension, yields the normative-theological position that AI can support but should not replace core pastoral functions that require an interpersonal encounter.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating clinical evidence, digital ethics, and theological anthropology into a single evaluative framework equipped with indicators and criteria of use. Theoretically, the study clarifies that the limit of AI in the pastoral relationship is an ontological-theological boundary rather than merely a technical one, while acknowledging that this boundary is a position held within a particular doctrinal framework. Practically, the framework can help churches develop protocols for AI use, seminaries design curricula in AI literacy, and spiritual care institutions ensure that AI functions as a partner rather than a master, under human pastoral supervision.

These conclusions should be read within the limits of a corpus published between 2015 and 2024, the heterogeneity of the included studies, and the theological position from which the analysis proceeds. Future research should test the framework empirically through qualitative studies of ministers, pastoral counselors, and congregants in Indonesia, conduct comparative studies across denominations, and explore Southeast Asian communal values as resources for a contextual ethics of AI.

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Theofilus Josias F.K. Matrutty: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, and Writing, Original Draft Preparation. Wilma Sance Pattiasina: Supervision, Project Administration, Validation, and Writing, Review & Editing. Enis Kobak: Investigation, Data Curation, Validation, and Formal Analysis. Yudhy Sanjaya: Visualization, Validation, and Writing, Review & Editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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