

Artificial Intelligence and Religious Authority in Ghanaian Christianity: A Mediated- Authority Framework for Ethical and Theological Governance

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Research Article

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is entering Christian preaching, education, administration, translation, pastoral communication and digital evangelism, but little empirical research examines how AI-assisted content acquires religious authority in African churches. This qualitative study explored how Ghanaian Christian stakeholders understand the uses, limits and governance of AI. Thirty-one participants from seven stakeholder categories were purposively selected in Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast and Tamale between January and June 2026. Semi-structured interviews were examined through reflexive thematic analysis and interpreted with a mediated-authority framework. Six themes were developed: bounded ministry assistance; derivative authority through human and institutional endorsement; contested use in sermon preparation; risks to theological formation and embodied pastoral care; governance, data protection and digital discipleship; and inequalities involving infrastructure, language and foreign platform power. Participants generally accepted administrative, educational, translation and media applications when accountable humans retained oversight, but opposed substituting AI for spiritual discernment, prophecy, doctrinal judgement or pastoral responsibility. The findings show that AI-assisted content becomes religiously consequential through platform design, human selection, ecclesial endorsement and community reception, with digital competence and institutional capacity shaping each stage. The article advances a risk-proportionate, church-owned governance approach centred on verification, disclosure, privacy, formation, contextual review and named human accountability in Ghana.

1 Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence has moved rapidly from a specialised technical field into everyday practices of writing, searching, translation, image production, teaching, administration and decision support. Within Christian communities, generative systems can produce sermon outlines, Bible-study materials, prayers, theological explanations, pastoral messages and social-media content in seconds. These capacities create opportunities for accessibility, communication and learning, but they also intensify a longstanding theological question: what makes religious speech authoritative? Scholarship on religion and AI has begun to examine these implications, yet empirical work on African Christian settings remains limited [1–4].

Fluent religious language is not equivalent to religious authority. A text may sound scriptural without being exegetically responsible, pastoral without sharing another person's vulnerability, or prophetic without arising from divine revelation and accountable ecclesial discernment. The decisive issue is therefore not whether a machine can arrange religious words, but how those words become trusted, performed, institutionalised and acted upon. This article distinguishes socially effective authority, thus, the recognised capacity to shape belief and practice from theological legitimacy, the judgement that such guidance is warranted by Scripture, doctrine, vocation, communal discernment and the accountability structures of a Christian tradition. AI-assisted content may acquire the former without possessing the latter.

Digital-religion scholarship shows that media do not merely carry unchanged religious messages. Media environments reorganise visibility, expertise, participation, memory and authority [5, 6]. In Ghana, radio, television, telephone prayer lines, WhatsApp devotionals, livestreamed worship, social-media prophecy and digital fundraising have already transformed religious presence. De Witte's account of 'spirit media' is particularly relevant because it demonstrates how voice, image and technology participate in the production of charismatic presence rather than merely transmitting it [7]. Generative AI extends this history of mediation: unlike a microphone, it can silently draft a sermon, imitate a leader's voice, personalise a fundraising appeal or generate spiritual language that no accountable human has carefully examined.

Ghanaian Christianity provides a productive setting for analysing these developments. Historic mission churches commonly emphasise Scripture, creeds, sacramental order, ordained office and synodical governance. Classical Pentecostal churches combine biblical authority with pneumatological experience and recognised ministry offices. Independent charismatic and neo-prophetic ministries may organise authority around founder-leaders, prophecy, healing, deliverance, spiritual direction, testimony and media visibility. African Independent Churches bring additional ritual, communal and indigenous forms of authority into this plural ecology [8–13]. AI therefore enters a field in which authority is already negotiated among office, charisma, education, perceived spiritual efficacy, institutional recognition and community reception.

Existing Ghanaian research suggests that media-intensive charismatic and neo-prophetic ministries have linked broadcasting, social media, branding and audiovisual production to evangelism, membership expansion and public visibility [14–16]. Historic mission churches also use digital media, especially in urban parishes, denominational offices and educational institutions. Denomination alone, however, is an inadequate predictor of AI adoption: infrastructure, finance, leadership, age profile, technical personnel and location may be more decisive. This study therefore treats denominational and spatial differences as empirical questions rather than fixed assumptions.

The literature on religion and AI remains heavily normative and disproportionately shaped by Western institutional and theological settings. African Christian contexts are often treated as sites of technology adoption rather than sources of theory. This article addresses that limitation by developing and testing a framework from Ghanaian religious realities. It does not claim that AI is a spiritual person, nor does it assume that calling AI 'only a tool' resolves the problem. Technologies structure attention, sources, speed, visibility and the range of choices available to users. The relevant question is how technological influence becomes socially authoritative, pastorally consequential or theologically misrecognised.

Against this background, the study asks three questions: (1) How are AI tools currently used and evaluated by Ghanaian Christian stakeholders? (2) Through what human, institutional and platform processes do AI-assisted outputs acquire or challenge religious authority? (3) What theological, ethical and contextual safeguards are required for responsible adoption? By addressing these questions, the article offers an empirically refined mediated-authority framework and a governance approach grounded in Ghanaian Christian experience.

2 Ghanaian Christianity and plural forms of authority

2.1 Ecclesial, charismatic and communal authority

Religious authority in Ghanaian Christianity is plural rather than singular. In episcopal and presbyteral traditions, authority is structured through ordination, doctrine, liturgy, councils and institutional accountability. Pentecostal and charismatic communities place particular emphasis on the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, prophecy, healing and the demonstrable fruit of ministry. Neo-prophetic settings may concentrate authority in founder-leaders whose claims are validated through testimony, perceived revelation, deliverance and media performance [8–12]. Weber's account of charismatic authority remains useful here: charisma is not simply personal magnetism but a socially recognised extraordinary capacity sustained by followers' responses and institutional routines [17]. Digital visibility adds a further layer because follower counts, repeated clips, livestream audiences and platform metrics can operate as signs of influence and authorisation, although visibility alone cannot establish theological legitimacy [18].

Authority is also relational. African philosophical and theological accounts of personhood emphasise moral formation, belonging and obligations within community [19–21]. These accounts challenge any reduction of intelligence or authority to isolated cognitive output. A religious leader is not authoritative merely because the leader supplies correct information; authority is connected to history, character, accountability, recognised vocation and the willingness to remain responsible for consequences. Translation is equally important. Bediako and Sanneh show that Christian faith becomes culturally inhabitable through translation, but translation is never a neutral transfer of vocabulary [21, 22]. AI-generated Ghanaian-language theology therefore raises questions about whose categories are translated, which meanings are lost and who has the competence to verify the result.

2.2 Religious mediation and platform power

AI-mediated religion must be situated within a longer history of technological mediation. Print stabilised doctrinal and liturgical texts; radio privileged voice and reach; television privileged image and performance; and social media privileged interaction, repetition and metrics. Digital media therefore do more than extend religious communication: they can reconfigure who becomes visible, how claims are authenticated and how authority is performed [5–7]. Generative AI is distinctive because it produces new linguistic and visual material through probabilistic modelling. The apparent coherence of an answer can create an illusion of autonomous knowledge while the system's data sources, commercial rules and uncertainty remain opaque to ordinary users.

Platform power precedes the moment when a pastor enters a prompt. Model ownership, safety rules, training corpora, language coverage, ranking systems and commercial incentives shape what can be produced. Generated responses may overrepresent English-language, Western, highly indexed and commercially published sources, while Ghanaian oral theology, local scholarship and low-resource languages remain marginal. Uncritical reliance can therefore import hidden hierarchies of knowledge into preaching, education and pastoral communication, reinforcing concerns about algorithmic coloniality, unequal representation and platform power [23–27].

2.3 African and Ghanaian AI-policy context

The African Union's Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy calls for an Africa-centred, development-focused, ethical and equitable approach to AI [28]. Ghana's National AI Strategy likewise emphasises innovation, responsible governance, inclusion, local capability and national transformation [29]. These public frameworks are relevant to churches because Christian institutions are major actors in education, health, welfare and media. Ecclesial use of AI is not merely a private matter when church communication shapes political opinion, health decisions, financial behaviour, interreligious relations and public trust.

Religious organisations can contribute distinctive ethical resources to national AI debate, but their credibility depends on governing their own practices transparently. Corpuz's theological virtue-ethics approach argues that AI in religious education should remain ordered to prudence, justice, temperance, charity and human flourishing rather than technical efficiency alone [30]. His human-centred account of AI and interreligious dialogue similarly stresses inclusion, institutional responsibility and ethical purpose in faith-based organisations [31]. These approaches align with an African public theology that asks not only what AI can do, but whom it serves, whose knowledge it represents and who remains accountable when harm occurs.

2.4 Digital competence, denominational culture and spatial inequality

Any account of ecclesial AI in Ghana must begin with the digital capacity of the wider population. Digital access and digital competence are uneven, and device ownership or familiarity with social media should not be confused with the ability to evaluate generative systems critically. The Ghana Statistical Service reported that 5.1 million persons aged six years and older were digitally excluded and that 31.4% had not used the internet in the three months preceding the 2021 census [32]. The International Finance Corporation likewise identified a persistent gap between the demand for and supply of basic, intermediate and advanced digital skills, estimating that more than nine million jobs in Ghana would require digital skills by 2030 [33]. Ecclesial adoption therefore depends not only on theological openness but also on electricity, connectivity, device access, educational attainment, cost, institutional resources and trained personnel.

Pentecostal and charismatic churches, particularly independent charismatic and neo-prophetic ministries, have often been visible early adopters because they connect radio, television, livestreaming, social media, branding and audiovisual production with evangelism, youth engagement and charismatic presence. Ghanaian studies document extensive use of social media and digital platforms for leadership visibility, religious dissemination and membership expansion [14–16]. This media orientation creates organisational pathways through which AI can enter sermon preparation, publicity, translation, video editing, audience analysis, fundraising and digital pastoral communication.

For ecclesial purposes, AI competence must extend beyond opening an application or producing fluent text. It includes prompt formulation, source verification, recognition of fabricated or biased output, privacy protection, disclosure, cultural interpretation and the ability to explain why an output has been accepted. Evidence from Ghana shows that internet use varies with education and place of residence, while an assessment of student teachers found stronger foundational competence than competence in deeper integration and innovation [34, 35]. A church can therefore be technologically visible without being critically AI-literate: screens, livestreams and active social-media accounts do not by themselves demonstrate doctrinal, ethical or interpretive competence.

Historic mission churches also use digital technologies and AI, particularly in cathedrals, large urban parishes, universities, denominational offices, charismatic renewal movements and congregations with professionally staffed media teams. Their adoption may be more formal, committee-based and uneven across local congregations. The contrast should not be treated as absolute: church size, age profile, education, leadership style, finance, governance and location may explain more than

denominational identity in particular cases. Evidence on the prevalence of AI use across Ghanaian churches remains limited; denominational differences should therefore be treated as propositions for empirical testing rather than settled national facts.

Spatial inequality further conditions adoption. Churches in Accra, Kumasi, Tema, Takoradi and other urban or commercially developed centres are more likely to possess reliable connectivity, stable electricity, skilled volunteers and budgets for paid digital services than many hinterland congregations. Rural churches may use mobile phones and WhatsApp effectively while lacking capacity for advanced AI systems, synthetic media, data governance or expert verification. AI-assisted authority may consequently become most visible where generated content is frequent, polished and repeatedly endorsed. This creates the risk of a two-tier ecclesial ecology in which digitally amplified ministries gain reach and perceived competence while less-connected congregations become dependent on externally generated content. Responsible governance must therefore combine safeguards with inclusion, training and locally appropriate infrastructure.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design and setting

The study used an interpretivist qualitative design with contextual theological interpretation. This approach was appropriate because participants' judgements about authority, discernment, competence and risk are embedded in ecclesial traditions and social relationships. Fieldwork took place in Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast and Tamale between January and June 2026. The sites provided variation in denominational presence, theological education, media infrastructure, technological access and regional context. The mediated-authority framework guided the research questions and later interpretation but was not used as a fixed coding scheme.

3.2 Participants, sampling and data collection

Thirty-one participants were selected through purposive maximum-variation sampling across seven stakeholder categories: senior ecclesial leaders; Pentecostal-charismatic pastors and digital ministers; theologians and seminary educators; church media and technology practitioners; Christian ethicists and safeguarding professionals; AI and data-protection specialists; and lay or youth digital-ministry leaders. Participants were eligible based on their institutional responsibilities, theological expertise, ministry experience, technical knowledge, or direct involvement in digital ministry. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that explored the current use of AI in church settings, sources of religious authority, sermon authorship, prophecy and spiritual discernment, pastoral care, data protection, Ghanaian-language applications, technological infrastructure, and governance. Most interviews were conducted remotely by telephone or Zoom. Remote interviewing was deliberately incorporated into the research design because it enabled the inclusion of participants from varied geographical, ecclesial, and metropolitan contexts that would have been difficult to reach through face-to-face fieldwork alone. Participants were assigned role-based codes: SEL for senior ecclesial leaders, PC for Pentecostal-charismatic pastors, TE for theological educators, MT for media or technology practitioners, CE for Christian ethicists, DP for data-protection specialists, and YD for youth digital-ministry leaders. Institutional names, cities, and other identifying details were omitted from reported quotations to minimise the risk of deductive identification.

3.3 Data analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis [36]. The researcher first familiarised himself with the interview records and generated initial semantic and interpretive codes. The nine provisional domains in the field report were then compared for overlap, divergence and explanatory value and consolidated into six themes. Analysis was abductive: participants' accounts were given priority, while the mediated-authority framework functioned as a sensitising concept during later interpretation rather than as a predetermined template. Comparisons across roles and cities identified convergent, divergent and minority positions. Numerical frequency was not treated as a measure of significance; dissenting accounts were retained when they clarified theological boundaries or institutional risks.

3.4 Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Credibility was supported by variation across stakeholder roles and regions, comparison of convergent and dissenting accounts, and repeated checking of codes, themes and quotations against the field records. An analytic audit trail recorded how the nine provisional domains were consolidated into six themes. Reflexivity involved examining how the researcher's clerical, theological and academic location might shape access, questioning and interpretation. The revised reporting was checked against relevant items in the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) [37].

3.5 Ethical considerations

The study was ethical approved. Participants received information about the study's purpose, confidentiality, voluntary participation, recording and withdrawal procedures, and recorded oral informed consent was obtained before interview. Data were de-identified, stored securely and restricted to research use. No identifiable participant or pastoral information was entered into public generative AI systems.

4 The mediated-authority framework

The central argument is that AI has no intrinsic religious authority, yet AI-assisted content may acquire derivative social authority through a sociotechnical and ecclesial cycle. Figure 1 depicts seven linked moments: platform ownership and training data; prompting and generated output; human selection and verification; clerical, charismatic or institutional endorsement; media formatting and algorithmic amplification; community interpretation and action; and practical consequences followed by feedback, testimony, correction or repeated use. The cycle explains social authorisation; it does not by itself establish theological legitimacy.

4.1 Platform ownership, data and generated output

Every religious output begins before the user sees a sentence. Training corpora determine which authors, languages and traditions are represented; model design determines how uncertainty is expressed; safety rules determine which topics are restricted; and commercial incentives shape access and personalisation. These conditions do not predetermine a sermon, but they structure the field of possible responses. A church relying on a model trained predominantly on Western evangelical material may receive apparently universal answers that marginalise Catholic, Anglican, African Independent, Pentecostal, indigenous or interreligious perspectives.

4.2 Human prompting, selection and verification

Human agency enters through prompts, source choices, editing and the decision to adopt or reject an output. The user determines whether AI functions as a brainstorming aid, translation assistant, ghostwriter or oracle. Because generated language can be false while sounding confident, the adopting human remains responsible for verification. This is especially important in doctrine, health, politics, finance, alleged spiritual danger and pastoral care. A leader cannot transfer accountability to a system after presenting its output as trustworthy.

4.3 Ecclesial endorsement, unequal adoption and media amplification

Generated content gains social weight when a recognised actor performs or circulates it. A sermon borrows authority from the preacher's office; spiritual direction may borrow from prophetic reputation; and a social-media post may borrow legitimacy from a church logo or verified account. The intensity of this process varies across Ghanaian churches. Media-intensive Pentecostal, charismatic and neo-prophetic ministries, as well as large urban congregations of any tradition, may integrate AI into high-frequency communication more rapidly than small or less-connected congregations. Where AI-assisted outputs are repeatedly preached, branded, translated, clipped and circulated, congregants may encounter them as normal extensions of clerical or charismatic voice. Platform recommendation can further intensify reach, so authority is produced through the relationship among output, institutional culture, endorsement, visibility and reception [14–16].

4.4 Community reception, consequences and feedback

The social efficacy of authority culminates in reception, but theological legitimacy is not created by acceptance alone. Congregants may accept, negotiate, ignore or resist generated content according to prior trust, perceived efficacy, doctrinal

expectations and community norms. Reception can produce serious consequences: people may change behaviour, disclose private information, give money, seek or avoid medical care, accuse others of spiritual harm, or repeat a message to wider audiences. Testimony and apparent success may feed back into further use, while complaints or public correction may expose hidden technological dependence. This feedback loop makes socially effective authority dynamic rather than linear and reinforces the need for independent theological and ethical evaluation.

4.5 Can authority exist without agency?

A counterargument is that authority may attach to discourse rather than to the moral agency of its producer. Anonymous prayers, inherited liturgies, lectionaries and translated texts can guide communities even when the original author is absent. A church may also affirm that God can use material instruments without attributing personhood to them. These observations prevent the simplistic conclusion that non-human production automatically makes religious content invalid.

Nevertheless, the analogy has limits. Liturgical and doctrinal texts normally enter communities through identifiable traditions, authorised processes, stable sources and interpretive accountability. Generative outputs are probabilistic, variable, often source-opaque and shaped by private platforms. A community may judge an AI-assisted statement to be true or edifying without treating the system as a prophet, pastor or doctrinal office-holder. The distinction is therefore between the possible authority of content and the agency of the system. Content may be authorised by accountable humans and institutions; the machine itself does not thereby acquire vocation, conscience, covenantal membership or responsibility.

4.6 Analytical propositions

Proposition 1

(derivative authority). An AI-assisted output is more likely to be treated as authoritative when recognised persons or institutions select, verify, perform and publicly own it. Such social authorisation does not confer intrinsic agency or theological legitimacy on the system.

Proposition 2

(authority density). The religious consequences of AI-assisted speech intensify when clerical or charismatic endorsement converges with institutional branding, repetition, immediacy, personalisation and platform amplification. Media-rich settings therefore create denser conditions of authorisation, not a superior form of machine authority.

Proposition 3

(proportional oversight). The required level of human scrutiny rises with audience vulnerability, the doctrinal or pastoral consequence of the task, system opacity and scale, and the irreversibility of possible harm. A responsible user's inability to explain and defend an adopted output indicates that assistance has become substitution.

5 Findings

The analysis generated six themes. Participants did not divide simply into supporters and opponents of AI. Their judgements varied according to the task, the vulnerability of the audience, the user's competence, the presence of meaningful human oversight and the theological claims attached to an output.

5.1 AI was accepted as bounded ministry assistance

Across stakeholder groups, AI was most readily accepted in administration, translation, education, accessibility, media production and routine communication. Participants described data management, scheduling, financial administration, sermon subtitling, content repurposing, social-media drafting and audience engagement as legitimate uses when the system remained subordinate to accountable human judgement. The central distinction was therefore not between use and non-use, but between assistance and substitution.

"People hear 'AI and the church' and immediately think about robots preaching. This is a caricature. In my own work, we use AI for translations, for data management, for scheduling, for content creation for our social media ministry." (SEL1)

"We use AI to analyse engagement, to optimise our content, to translate sermons into local languages, to make our livestreams more accessible. These are good things." (MT1)

These accounts position AI as organisational and communicative infrastructure rather than a religious agent. They also suggest that practical familiarity can produce more differentiated judgements: technically experienced participants often supported low-risk applications while drawing firmer boundaries around doctrine, prophecy and confidential care.

5.2 AI acquired derivative authority through human and institutional endorsement

Participants consistently denied that AI possessed independent ecclesial authority. Nevertheless, generated content became influential when selected by a trusted pastor, circulated through an official church account or presented within a recognised ministry. The authority of the output was therefore borrowed from office, charisma, institutional branding and community trust. Concern intensified when technological assistance was concealed or when digital guidance bypassed established accountability structures.

"AI is not our enemy. It is a tool, like the printing press, like the microphone. ... The algorithm can suggest, but only the shepherd can discern. ... Human hands must always guide, verify, and ultimately decide." (SEL2)

"When a young person receives their spiritual guidance from a TikTok preacher or an AI-generated devotional, where is the accountability? Where is the institutional oversight? ... Traditional authority structures are being bypassed, and we have not yet developed the theological frameworks to address this shift." (TE1)

These accounts support the concept of derivative authority. Congregants may receive AI-assisted material as authoritative not because they recognise the system as a pastor or prophet, but because a recognised Christian actor has authorised, performed or distributed it.

5.3 Sermon preparation was the principal contested boundary

The sharpest disagreement concerned sermon preparation. Some Pentecostal-charismatic participants treated AI as an extension of commentaries, dictionaries and Bible software. Others regarded full sermon generation as a theological category error because the system lacks prayer, understanding, spiritual commitment and responsibility. A mediating position evaluated AI by whether it strengthened or displaced study, prayer, visitation and contextual interpretation.

"When it comes to the pulpit, the anointing cannot be coded. AI can help me research, organise, and even suggest illustrations but the Word must come from a Spirit-filled vessel. That is non-negotiable." (PC1)

"I have seen some of my colleagues using AI to write entire sermons. They copy, they paste, they preach. But where is the prayer? Where is the wrestling with the text? ... AI should be like a commentary, not a ghostwriter." (PC2)

"If AI enables a pastor to spend more time in prayer, visitation, and study, it may be a blessing. If it becomes a shortcut that substitutes for genuine engagement with scripture, it is a curse. ... But the responsibility remains with the pastor, not the algorithm." (CE1)

The disagreement did not follow a simple denominational division. Participants in both Pentecostal-charismatic and academic settings expressed permissive and restrictive positions. The decisive issue was whether AI remained an aid within ministerial formation or replaced the practices through which preaching authority is cultivated.

5.4 Christian formation, wisdom and embodied care were regarded as non-automatable

Theological educators and ethicists distinguished information from formation, intelligence from wisdom and content from encounter. Their concern was not only that AI might produce errors, but that habitual dependence could weaken theological struggle, communal discernment, prayer and pastoral presence. Participants maintained that systems can generate consoling language but cannot bear responsibility for grief, abuse, reconciliation or spiritual direction.

"Christianity is not information; it is transformation. It is not content; it is relationship. AI can deliver content, but it cannot facilitate encounter with the living Christ." (TE2)

"We need to teach our students the difference between intelligence and wisdom. AI can be intelligent—extremely intelligent by certain measures—but it cannot be wise. Wisdom is about discernment, about knowing the good and choosing it, about integrating knowledge with virtue." (TE3)

This theme placed theological anthropology at the centre of governance. Participants located authority in embodied, relational and morally accountable persons and communities rather than in linguistic performance alone.

5.5 Governance required data protection, interdisciplinary training and digital discipleship

There was broad agreement that churches should neither ban AI indiscriminately nor adopt it informally without policy. Participants called for church-owned governance, role-specific training, disclosure, verification, privacy protection, incident reporting and collaboration among clergy, theologians, media professionals and technical experts. Data governance was treated as a pastoral matter because churches hold membership, financial, counselling and health information.

"The church holds a tremendous amount of personal data—membership records, financial information, pastoral counselling notes, even health information. ... The congregation must know what data is being collected, how it is being used, and who has access to it." (DP1)

"Many media professionals in the church are technically skilled but theologically uninformed. ... Conversely, many clergy are theologically trained but technologically illiterate. ... We need to create spaces where theologians and technologists can learn from each other." (MT2)

"Digital literacy is a form of catechesis now. If we do not teach our young people to navigate the digital world with discernment, the world will teach them, and the lessons will not be Christian." (YD1)

Governance was therefore understood as formation rather than compliance alone. Participants wanted policies that cultivate judgement, assign responsibility and equip congregants to question synthetic content, fraudulent appeals and automated spiritual claims.

5.6 Ghanaian adoption was shaped by infrastructure, language and foreign platform power

Participants rejected a uniform account of AI adoption. Media-intensive urban ministries were described as better positioned to integrate AI than small, rural or hinterland congregations, while northern participants reported less reliable connectivity, fewer resources and dependence on systems designed elsewhere. At the same time, AI was valued for translation and outreach in languages with limited digital resources. This produced a double concern: exclusion from useful technologies and cultural dependence on foreign platforms.

"We are, in so many ways, consumers of technology created elsewhere. This is not neutral. ... We need to ask: does this tool serve our mission? Does it respect our culture? Does it empower our people? Or does it make us dependent on foreign systems and foreign values?" (SEL3)

"My context is very different from that of my colleagues in Accra or Kumasi. We have less infrastructure, less reliable internet, fewer resources. ... We cannot just import solutions from the South, we need solutions that work in the North." (PC3)

The accounts show that technological visibility is not equivalent to theological legitimacy or responsible competence. Greater adoption may increase the frequency with which AI-assisted content is treated as authoritative, but it also increases the need for local review, language competence and institutional accountability.

6 Discussion

6.1 Assistance is legitimate only when it does not become substitution

The findings replace a binary debate about whether churches should use AI with a task-specific distinction between assistance and substitution. Participants accepted administrative, translation, educational and media applications because they could extend access and reduce routine burdens. This is consistent with scholarship on AI-assisted preaching and religious education, which suggests that value depends on whether technology supports human reflection or displaces it [30, 38]. The decisive ethical test is whether the responsible Christian actor understands the output, verifies it and remains capable of explaining the judgement adopted. Efficiency alone cannot justify the transfer of doctrinal, pastoral or spiritual responsibility.

6.2 The data empirically support derivative rather than intrinsic AI authority

Participants' accounts support the mediated-authority framework developed from digital-religion scholarship [5, 6]. AI did not appear as an autonomous religious office-holder. Its output acquired social weight through the pastor who selected it, the church account that circulated it, the charismatic reputation that performed it and the community that received it. This finding extends de Witte's account of technologically mediated charismatic presence [7] and Jetter's analysis of digital authorisation [18]. The empirical contribution is to show that AI authority is neither located solely in the model nor explained solely by user intention. It is produced through a chain of platform design, human selection, ecclesial endorsement and reception; accountability must therefore follow the same chain.

6.3 Sermon use exposes the relationship between authorship, formation and pneumatology

The disagreement over sermon preparation clarifies why authorship cannot be reduced to textual ownership. For participants, preaching authority was formed through prayer, study, contextual listening, ministerial character and accountability to a congregation. AI could support research, but full generation risked concealing the absence of these formative practices. The findings therefore deepen the distinction between computational fluency and spiritual discernment. Christian claims about prophecy and the Holy Spirit cannot be authenticated by statistical language generation, while theological anthropology resists defining the human person by information-processing ability [39–42]. Pope Leo XIV's Magnifica Humanitas similarly places human dignity, moral responsibility, digital literacy and the common good at the centre of Christian engagement with AI [43].

6.4 Governance must join technical competence to ecclesial accountability

The strong demand for governance confirms that informal individual use is inadequate for institutions that hold sensitive data and speak with public religious authority. Ghana's Data Protection Act requires lawful, proportionate and secure processing of personal information, while research on virtual church participation in Ghana underscores congregants' privacy and security concerns [44, 45]. Broader AI frameworks emphasise transparency, accountability, reliability, inclusion, privacy and human oversight [46–50]. Participants translated these principles into ecclesial terms: named responsibility, doctrinal review, informed disclosure, pastoral confidentiality, complaint procedures and digital discipleship. Their priorities also converge with a 2026 Ghanaian Catholic workshop that called for pastoral alignment, protection of personal data and human oversight in AI-assisted processes [51]. Governance must therefore be church-owned and interdisciplinary rather than outsourced to vendors or left solely to technically skilled media teams.

6.5 Contextual justice requires attention to digital competence, geography and platform ownership

The regional accounts complicate any claim that one denomination or location will adopt AI uniformly. Existing evidence already demonstrates uneven digital access and competence in Ghana [32–35]. The interviews add an ecclesial dimension: urban and media-intensive ministries may adopt AI more rapidly, while northern, rural and hinterland congregations face infrastructure and resource constraints. The data did not support a fixed denominational hierarchy; participants linked adoption more consistently to media culture, institutional resources, leadership and place. Lower adoption should not be romanticised, because it may also limit translation, accessibility and educational opportunities. At the same time, dependence on foreign models can marginalise Ghanaian languages and communal theologies, reinforcing concerns about algorithmic coloniality [23, 24]. Responsible inclusion therefore requires local capability, culturally competent review and investment in low-resource congregations.

6.6 Refining the mediated-authority framework

The findings retain four core movements in the mediated-authority framework platform design, generated output, human endorsement and community reception but add three cross-cutting conditions. First, user competence determines whether oversight is meaningful rather than ceremonial. Second, infrastructure and institutional resources shape who can adopt, verify and contest AI. Third, ministerial and digital formation influence whether the system assists judgement or gradually replaces it. The refined framework therefore treats discernment, competence and contextual capacity as conditions of responsible mediation. AI does not become a prophet, pastor or doctrinal authority; it becomes consequential when accountable Christians authorise its output within existing structures of trust.

7 Governance policy and ecclesial implications

7.1 Governance policy

Churches and theological institutions should adopt written, risk-proportionate AI governance policies. Low-risk uses such as grammar assistance, scheduling, non-sensitive administration and accessibility support may be permitted with ordinary human review. Public translation, educational outlines, social-media drafts and sermon brainstorming require documented review, cultural and linguistic checking, and disclosure where AI contribution is substantial. Doctrinal teaching, full sermon generation, counselling support, political communication and content for children require heightened oversight, named accountability, source audit, privacy assessment and clear escalation procedures. Automated prophecy, autonomous spiritual diagnosis, fabricated testimony, impersonation, undisclosed synthetic preaching, autonomous doctrinal or safeguarding decisions, and the entry of identifiable pastoral data into public systems should be prohibited. Policies should also establish verification channels, incident reporting, rapid correction, complaints and support for affected persons [44, 45, 49, 50].

7.2 Denominations and congregations

Denominations should move from informal individual practice to approved institutional governance. Policies should be adopted through appropriate episcopal, synodical, presbyteral or board structures and reviewed regularly as technologies change. Congregations should receive practical education about fabricated or unsupported output, fraud, privacy and verification, including clear channels for confirming fundraising requests, prophecies and public statements.

7.3 Theological education and ministerial formation

Seminaries and Christian universities should integrate AI literacy into hermeneutics, homiletics, pastoral theology, ethics and research methods. Assessment should examine reasoning, source verification and oral defence rather than polished output alone. Students should learn both the technical operation of AI and the theological practices it cannot replace: close reading, prayer, communal discernment, supervised ministry and embodied pastoral care.

7.4 Media, pastoral care and inclusion

Church media teams should authenticate official accounts, label synthetic content and maintain correction procedures. Pastoral-care teams should prohibit identifiable counselling or safeguarding data from public AI systems and require timely human escalation. National and ecumenical bodies should support Ghanaian-language resources, digital-skills training and proportionate safeguards for small, rural and hinterland congregations so that responsible governance does not become a privilege of wealthy urban ministries.

8 Recommendations

Implementation should proceed in stages. Churches should first inventory current AI uses and classify them by risk. They should then appoint accountable reviewers, adopt disclosure and data-retention rules, train clergy and media teams, and establish incident-response and complaint procedures. Theological institutions should develop digital-discipleship programmes for ministers and congregants, while denominational and ecumenical bodies should invest in Ghanaian-language resources and low-bandwidth tools. Pilot programmes should be evaluated before wider deployment, with particular attention to doctrinal accuracy, pastoral outcomes, privacy, accessibility and effects on ministerial formation.

9 Limitations

This qualitative study does not estimate the prevalence of AI use across Ghanaian churches. The purposive sample of 31 participants provided stakeholder and regional diversity but cannot represent every denomination, language, region or Christian movement. The analysis relied on interview accounts rather than direct observation of sermons, media workflows or institutional AI systems; self-reports may therefore differ from actual practice, especially where AI use raises concerns about plagiarism, confidentiality or denominational policy. Role-based anonymisation protected participants but limited the amount of contextual detail that could be reported. Finally, the findings capture a rapidly changing technological and policy environment between January and June 2026. Future research should combine interviews with surveys, digital ethnography, content analysis and longitudinal policy evaluation.

10 Conclusion

The field data shows that Ghanaian Christian stakeholders neither reject AI wholesale nor accept it as an autonomous religious authority. They generally welcome administrative, translation, educational, accessibility and communication uses when competent humans retain oversight. Their strongest reservations arise where AI substitutes for prayerful study, spiritual discernment, doctrinal judgement, embodied pastoral care or responsibility for vulnerable persons. The disagreement over sermon preparation demonstrates that the crucial boundary is not the presence of technology but the displacement of the intellectual, spiritual and relational practices that form Christian ministry.

The findings empirically refine the mediated-authority framework. AI-assisted content becomes religiously consequential through platform design, human selection, ecclesial or charismatic endorsement and community reception. This chain is conditioned by digital competence, institutional resources, ministerial formation, language and geography. AI possesses no intrinsic prophetic, sacramental, doctrinal or pastoral authority, but its output may acquire derivative social authority when trusted Christian actors adopt it. Responsible use in Ghanaian Christianity therefore requires ecclesially owned governance, verified truth, transparent disclosure, data protection, contextual review, digital discipleship and named human accountability. The appropriate model is ecclesially generated and accountable authority that may be assisted by AI, not AI-generated authority that the church merely endorses after the fact.

Declarations

Ethics Approval

The study received ethical approval from the **Humanity and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi**, under approval reference HuSSREC/AP/392/VOL.5. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the approving institution and relevant standards for research involving human participants.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw, and the measures adopted to protect confidentiality. Participant codes were used in reporting the findings.

Consent for Publication

Participants provided informed consent for the publication of anonymised interview extracts and research findings. No personally identifying information has been included in the manuscript.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing financial or non-financial interests.

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Author Contribution

Prince Osei Yeboah was solely responsible for the conceptualisation and design of the study, literature review, participant recruitment, data collection, transcription, translation, data analysis and interpretation. He also developed the theoretical framework, prepared the original manuscript, revised and edited the article, designed the framework figure, and approved the final version for publication. The author accepts full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity and accountability of the work.

Data Availability

The interview data generated and analysed during this study are not publicly available because they contain sensitive religious and political information that could compromise participants' confidentiality. De-identified excerpts supporting the findings are presented in the article. Additional anonymised data may be made available by the author upon reasonable request, subject to confidentiality considerations and participants' consent.

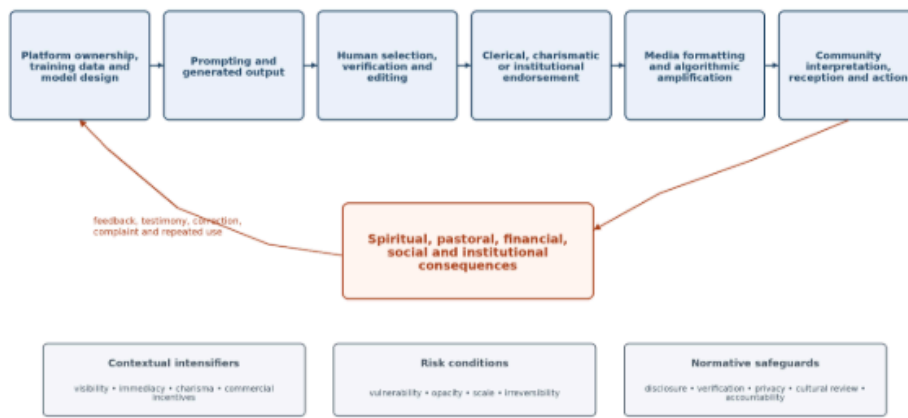
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Figures



Authority is produced through a sociotechnical and ecclesial cycle; responsibility must follow the same cycle.

Figure 1

The mediated-authority cycle in AI-assisted Christianity (author's conceptualisation)