

Guidance for Ministers and Scholars on the Use of Generative AI from General and Virginia Theological Seminaries

Preamble

This text emerged from a two-day conference on Authorship and Gen AI to invite the Virginia Theological Seminary and The General Theological Seminary communities to think more intentionally about the use of Gen AI. We trust that other communities, such as Episcopal schools and Dioceses of The Episcopal Church, will find this helpful.

As Christians, we believe that technology should serve the common good. People are of infinite value, created by a God who is inviting us all into a relationship with the divine. As we reflect on a technological tool, we seek to ensure that the tool enhances human dignity and community. Certain technologies are inescapable; they become part of the fabric of daily life. We suspect Gen AI is just such a technology. Our prayer and hope are that ways can be found to ensure that GenAI enhances human creativity, productivity, and decision-making.

We recognize that Gen AI is a remarkable, ever-changing tool that is here to stay; we advocate for appropriate guidelines for privacy; Gen AI requires prudence because it still makes mistakes in the return of information; we acknowledge that it has significant ecological – energy, water, and land – needs; we are concerned about the dominance of certain voices and the absence of other marginalized voices; we are troubled by the ways in which data is harvested *and analyzed* in unacknowledged ways; and we also want to suggest some guidance as to appropriate usage.

Whatever tools we use, we remain the authors of our actions. We are accountable for every word spoken in our name, every idea offered in our care, every truth claimed before God and neighbor.

Processes for Reflection

We affirm that the practice of deep and serious reflection on the use of Gen AI in content creation is pivotal. We invite all those who use Gen AI to reflect on the following questions when writing with generative Gen AI:

1. Who is my audience? Would my audience respond negatively if they knew Gen AI was used, and would they be justified in thinking this?
2. Who has access to any information that I share with a Gen AI platform? Are there legal or ethical considerations I should take seriously?
3. What harm could come from my use of Gen AI, especially to the intended audience of this work?

4. Are we aware of how Gen AI might provide a response that is inaccurate or damaging or unethical? How are we safeguarding against such an outcome?
5. Would my use of Gen AI undermine the value, impact, or relational qualities of the work in its quality as a product of work or in its reception?
6. As a person of faith, how is prayer and discernment informing my use of Gen AI?
7. As a person of faith, is this an activity that should not use generative Gen AI?
8. As a person of faith, and recognizing the environmental impact of Gen AI, is Gen AI the best tool for what I need? Is there a less impactful tool for the task?
9. How does both my work with and the product of Gen AI relate to my theological values or those of my community?
10. Have I taken the time to become “Gen AI literate,” that is, to educate myself on how the technology works, as well as the social impacts that it may have (e.g., environmental, privacy, and intellectual property impacts)?
11. Have I taken my role in the process of content creation carefully, by checking and revising any outputs generated by Gen AI?

Analysis Section

We recognize that we are in a season of change. Any guidelines will be rapidly superseded. We trust that almost everyone would acknowledge that the genre of writing is crucial. An administrative task, where the recipient is not surprised that this was written with assistance, is less ethically complex than a task where the recipient is assuming human agency and thought. The lack of complexity still might require some form of acknowledgment.

The truth is that most writing projects involve a range of participants. Authorship is shared. Creative work is collaborative. We also recognize that many tasks involving the use of Gen AI have analogous equivalences. We are accustomed to having speech writers, copy editors, grammar checkers, writing centers, writing tutors, readers, editors, research assistants, conversation partners, which shape a writing project. In the case of written projects, these people are often mentioned in the acknowledgments.

We know that for some such as neurodivergent persons and those writing in a second language, Gen AI affords an opportunity to use a tool that facilitates communication and organization. This is important and good.

Before using GenAI, users should engage in productive struggle- pondering, reflecting, grappling, imagining possibilities.

When appropriate, we are committed to the view that your voice must be apparent in the output even if Gen AI is used. Naturally, in the eventuality that the usage is creative (perhaps the telling of a story of fiction), then an alternative voice may be appropriate. In addition, you are responsible for every assertion that has your name attached.

We do affirm that there is an entire skill set that is made possible by traditional learning. Speed and ease are not ends in themselves. Critical thinking and learning matter and often time and friction are ingredients that lead to the most enduring learnings.

For a congregational leader, we recommend that:

- Gen AI may be used judiciously and prayerfully for ministry tasks including sermon preparation, pastoral correspondence, and liturgy.
- When Gen AI has been used in public worship content (sermons, prayers, liturgy), a brief general acknowledgment may be included: "AI tools assisted in the preparation of today's service."
- No acknowledgment is required for administrative use (emails, meeting notes, newsletters, fundraising) but again, responsibility travels with the signatory.
- Ministers retain full responsibility for all content, including theological accuracy.
- Confidential pastoral information (counseling, hospital visits, confessions) must never be entered into public AI platforms (or any platform where such data may be used for training purposes). Such information may only be used with Gen AI systems that operate in a secure, data-isolated environment – for example, locally hosted models or enterprise systems where data is not stored, shared, or used for model training.
- The congregation or elected leadership is informed annually in a manner appropriate to the context about the church's Gen AI-use practices.
- Ministers with documented disabilities or learning differences or using AI to write in a second language may use Gen AI more extensively as a reasonable accommodation, analogous to other workplace accommodations.
- Accommodation-based Gen AI use does not require public disclosure, as this could effectively disclose the disability.
- All staff, regardless of accommodation status, retain full responsibility for theological accuracy and pastoral appropriateness.
- The policy is reviewed annually as Gen AI capabilities and impact evolve.

In educational settings, we recommend that:

- Gen AI tools may be used selectively in coursework provided their use is fully and specifically disclosed (what tool, for what purpose, at what stage) and approved by the faculty member.
- Students should not use GenAI in ways that bypass the intellectual struggle that the assignment is designed to cultivate.

- When setting Gen AI related assessment exercises, be sure to offer an alternative for students who feel strongly about not using GenAI in formal writing. The prompt, conversation with Gen AI, critique of the quality of the Gen AI response, and author's response to it must be considered. Faculty should model responsible Gen AI use in their own teaching preparation and research.
- The goal is to produce graduates who can use Gen AI wisely and ethically, not graduates who have never encountered it or depend on it.
- Students must be able to demonstrate understanding of all submitted content through oral examination, follow-up questions, or in-class discussion.

For authors, we recommend that:

- It is widely accepted that authorship requires the author to be the creator or originator of the work or idea; they must make a substantial contribution, and they must be accountable for the work.
- Authors remain fully responsible for all factual claims, theological arguments, and attributed quotations.
- If a publication or institution requires disclosure, authors should comply with this requirement. Disclosure is required when Gen AI has contributed substantially to the content - defined as generating, structuring, or drafting significant portions of the text. A simple disclosure may be included, such as: "Gen AI Tools assisted in the creation of this work."
- Disclosure is not required for incidental use: e.g. grammar checking, synonym suggestions, formatting, or factual lookups.
- Peer-reviewed and published works making theological claims carry a higher disclosure obligation than opinion pieces or personal reflections.
- Editors may set their own Gen AI-use policies, and authors must comply with the publication's standards.
- A culture of honesty is more important than a policing mechanism.

We recognize that our proposals are offered for the moment we are in. As with all evolving technologies, we anticipate that our guidance will change in the future.

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Generative AI was not used in the production of this statement.