



Joining the Spirit: *Missio Dei* and artificial intelligence in digital missional praxis

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As artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes the digital landscape, can we discern the movement of the Spirit within this transformation? This research argues that AI developments, often seen as alien to spiritual mission, fall within the Triune God's realm and align with the *missio Dei*. By tracing the Gospel's historical adoption of evolving technologies – from the Incarnate Word to the Written, Proclaimed and now Digital Word – we propose AI as the latest iteration in God's unfolding mission. The study first examines the compatibility between *missio Dei* and AI, asserting that AI, as part of creation, invites missional engagement rather than retreat. Using Heyns' framework of various expressions of God's Word – creation, sustenance, redemption, incarnation, Scripture, proclamation and now the Digital Word – the research shows that AI is a natural extension of God's revelatory presence through innovation, and presents a way to participate in the mission of the Spirit. Next, the article explores AI's role in a rapidly globalising digital culture. This paradigm shift transforms self-perception and communication, creating opportunities and challenges for contextualised missions. The Gospel must be incarnated in ways that resonate with digital cultures, reflecting theology's ongoing adaptation to cultural shifts. Attention is given to *Digital Ecclesiology*, investigating how AI is reshaping church practices, virtual communities and online worship. The study also examines AI's intersection with mission and creativity, arguing that AI should serve rather than replace human creativity, fostering deep connection, beauty and truth. Artificial intelligence's potential as a tool for discipleship and formation is explored, assessing its role in personalised theological education, virtual fellowship and global outreach.

Contribution: The concept of *mission from the margins* provides a critical lens, calling for humility and attention to often overlooked voices. Those on society's edges offer insights into exclusionary structures, challenging AI's potential centralising tendencies.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; contextual mission; creative mission; digital ecclesiology; Digital Word; God's mission; homo digitalis.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) – with all its varied dimensions, from machine learning and neural networks to generative and predictive applications – has emerged as a transformative influence on modern society. Artificial intelligence is a significant disruptor and can be labelled a 'techruption'. The rapid changes brought about by the proliferation of AI challenge theologians and mission scholars to examine both the opportunities and the potential pitfalls of incorporating these AI-driven tools into the realms of missiology and missional praxis. In response, this article aims to broaden the conversation by providing a concise overview of AI and highlighting why it is crucial to interpret these technological developments through a missional lens.

At its core, AI can be understood as the capacity for computer systems to mimic certain human cognitive functions. This includes algorithms that learn from data (machine learning), complex architectures mirroring brain processes (neural networks and deep learning) and expert systems capable of providing specialised guidance. Generative AI creates new content – like text and images – while predictive AI analyses historical data to forecast future events. Such innovations rely on vast repositories of raw information, or 'data lakes', that fuel the growth and sophistication of AI models. Daniël Louw (2023:66) calls this the emergence of a 'new kind of reality'. In this new reality, 'Transcendence becomes an accessible sphere that unlocks new fields of knowledge not accessible within ordinary sensory perception' (Louw 2023:66).

In the field of Mission Studies, these advances raise pressing theological and practical questions. Can missiologists and practitioners join in with the Holy Spirit at work in our increasingly digital world? Moreover, could the Spirit be actively using AI to shape and further the *missio Dei* (mission of God)? How might local and global mission efforts creatively adopt these technologies without losing sight of the rich incarnational and contextual priorities that lie at the heart of Christian mission?

To mention but one global missionary organisation, the Lausanne Movement (Kim et al. n.d.) states that AI is changing how people connect with each other both in positive and unsettling ways. Kim et al. (n.d.) share the conviction that 'AI presents the church and Christian ministries with a special chance to advance and better our work'. In the discussion on AI, the Lausanne Movement concludes:

Overall, the state of AI in 2050 is likely to be characterized by rapid advancements in technology, along with a growing awareness of the ethical and societal implications of AI technology. It will be important for Christian researchers, policymakers, and the public to work together to ensure that AI is developed and used in a way that is centred on human dignity. (Kim et al. n.d.)

This research engages these questions, seeking to discern how AI might be a medium through which divine purposes unfold. By examining AI through a missional framework, the research explores fresh avenues for sharing the Gospel, nurturing discipleship and envisioning new forms of contextualised mission practice. In alignment with Pope Francis' call for ethical and inclusive AI development (Lubov 2025), this research proposes that AI must respect human dignity and be a tool for cooperation and unity.

Missio Dei and artificial intelligence

From a Christian perspective, AI need not be considered an alien or a threatening force outside of God's redemptive activity. The concept of *missio Dei* – that the Triune God is continually at work in creation – opens the door to viewing technological developments such as AI within God's providential care. The life-giving work of the Spirit is closely associated with God's living and life-giving Word (see Wright 2010:208 and Kim & Fitchett-Climenhaga 2022:11). Karkkainen (2002:18) states: 'The Father does all things by the Word in the Holy Spirit'. To illustrate this, we utilise South African theologian J.A. Heyns' (1988:146,147) multifaceted understanding of God's Word, tracing its progressive 'moments' through creation, sustenance, redemption, incarnation, Scripture and proclamation. The basis of the argument is that *missio Dei* means participating in the work of the Holy Spirit in the world (Kim 2009:27).

The Word that created

According to Heyns (1988:146), God's creative utterance – the Creating Word [*Skeppingswoord*] – represents the divine

entry into the world described in the Genesis narrative. The World Council of Churches (WCC) describes this as the overflow of the infinite love of the Triune God: 'God's mission begins with the act of creation. Creation's life and God's life are entwined' (WCC 2013:9). God's Spirit is the 'Breath of Life' (WCC 2013:7). This is not merely a once-off event; rather, it sets the stage for God's ongoing engagement with creation. Within *missio Dei*, creation itself is part of God's missionary outreach, and humans, as image-bearers, are invited to co-labour in the stewardship of this world.

The Word that provides

God's Providing Word (or Maintaining Word [*Voorsienigheidswoord*]) underscores that God sustains and nurtures creation. Far from leaving creation to its own devices, God remains intimately involved in its flourishing. Heyns (1988:146) describes this as 'a dynamic process of unfolding', in which humanity participates and shares responsibility for developments in society, technology and culture. We appreciate the explanation of the WCC (2013:10) that our 'participation in mission, our being in creation, and our practice of the life of the Spirit need to be woven together, for they are mutually transformative'. Artificial intelligence can be understood as another dimension of this unfolding, demanding responsible and ethical use in alignment with God's sustaining and mutually transformative mission.

The Word that saves

In Heyns's view, God does not abandon humanity in times of crisis. Instead, God establishes a covenant to remain involved and to proclaim salvation across history. This Saving Word [*Verlossingswoord*] highlights the redemptive nature of God's mission. The WCC (2013:38) reminds us that God's love does not proclaim human salvation separate from the renewal of all creation. Mission extends beyond human-centred goals. When considering AI, the idea of the Word that saves reminds us that all innovations, including AI, can be directed towards healing and justice. As part of *missio Dei*, AI has the potential to serve as a tool of restoration and transformation, if developed and applied to alleviate suffering and promote the God's kingdom.

The Word that became flesh (incarnational Word)

The incarnation of God in Christ is at the centre of Christian faith and missiological reflection. The WCC (2013:39) affirms the centrality of the incarnation, cross and resurrection in the Christian faith. God is present in the body of a human being, Jesus Christ, but God's presence extends towards and includes association with all materiality. Building on David Bosch's (1991:165) insights, the incarnation underscores that God not only took on human form in Jesus Christ but also participated in the full breadth of human experience – economic, political, religious, social and philosophical. In Heyns' words, God 'descended into the world to speak from within as a human being' (Heyns 1988:147). Today, digital spaces – largely shaped by AI – are part of our lived reality.

Engaging these spaces missionally follows the same incarnational logic, meeting people where they are, knowing that God's presence precedes our interaction.

The Written Word

Heyns points out that the Written Word [*Skrifgeworde Woord*] deepens God's Incarnational presence by taking on the form of human language. Translation into various tongues makes the divine accessible to different cultures, reflecting God's desire to communicate personally with all peoples. The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost is accompanied by the miracle of translation and hearing the Gospel in each one's present language. One must remember that the technological revolution brought about by the (Gutenberg) printing press significantly expanded the reach of Christianity by making God's Word, Scripture, widely available. It enabled a broader theological discourse, empowered laypeople to engage directly with Scripture and transformed both church praxis and missionary efforts. In the era of AI, digital translation and dissemination tools continue this incarnational dynamic, as the Gospel is expressed through modern media and technologies.

The Proclaimed Word

Finally, the Proclaimed Word [*Verkondige Woord*] bridges Scripture and daily life by speaking directly into cultural and linguistic contexts. Here, Bosch (1991:454) reminds us that incarnation 'presupposes translation' and that the church is 'reborn in every new context'. The Spirit's outpouring prepares the church for the proclamation of the Word by the laity (Yong 2019:160). When AI-driven tools serve as channels of proclamation – through digital media, online platforms, social media or interactive applications – they extend this incarnational principle by enabling the Gospel to be heard in diverse contexts, languages and cultural frameworks. The ability of AI to use art, create complex visual representations and master multiple languages should take communication and proclamation to new levels.

Summary – The Digital Word

In sum, Heyns's framework outlines a continuity in the ways God engages creation – through creation, sustenance, redemption, incarnation, Scripture and proclamation. Rather than viewing AI as detached from divine activity, we can see it as a further expression of the creative, sustaining and redemptive work of the Spirit of God. The WCC (2013:12) explains: 'The Spirit inspires human cultures and creativity, so it is part of our mission to acknowledge, respect, and cooperate with life-giving wisdoms in every culture and context'. Perhaps we need to add another unexpected category to Heyns's description, namely the Digital Word. The Digital Word speaks to *homo digitalis*. We concur with Joubert and Van der Watt (2021:7) when they state: 'The days of unmediated, technology-free faith formation are over. Now, more than ever, all of reality plays out on a continuum between virtual and real spaces'. Technology and especially

AI can no longer be regarded as opposing reality outside the parameters of faith, theology or the church.

Louw (2023:126) makes the point that metaphysical consciousness no longer only reflects on the reality behind physical phenomena; it also reflects on the reality in programmed software, digital systems and cyberspaces. Within the context of *missio Dei*, believers are challenged to adopt a critical yet hopeful stance: to steward AI ethically, harness its potential for the common good and remain open to the ways in which the Spirit may be at work – even in digital and algorithmic realms. Pope Francis (Lubov 2025) calls on society to 'ensure that AI contributes positively to the common good', reinforcing the theological mandate to steward AI ethically and align its applications with the *missio Dei*.

Artificial intelligence and contextualisation

This paradigm shift transforms self-perception and interpersonal communication on a global scale, creating new opportunities for contextualised missions. *Homo digitalis* lives in the metaverse, a new reality that requires a new grammar for doing and thinking (Louw 2023:149). Joubert and Van der Watt (2021:7) describe this as a reality where people embrace 'new biological selves and digital selves'. In this emerging context, the Gospel must be incarnated in ways that resonate within digital cultures, mirroring how theology has always adapted to cultural shifts. The digital self still needs an encounter and dialogue with the life-giving God.

A central claim in mission studies is that the Christian faith must be incarnated in every culture and context. The theological basis of this is explained by Bevens and Schroeder as the relational Trinity. God is relationship, communion and dialogue (Bevens & Schroeder 2011:26; Sweet 2025:148). The church, as God's visible presence in the world, is missionary by its very nature because it participates in God's life as *communion-in-mission* (Bevens & Schroeder 2011:26). For Bevens and Schroeder, mission is dialogue with people, cultures and the world (2011:27). Mission, in light of the incarnation – the Word becoming flesh – implies the legitimacy of contextualisation and engagement with all aspects of culture (Hastings 2012:loc. 1568). The incarnation is the greatest semiotic act in history, the Father's supreme rhetorical gesture (Sweet 2025:69). Increasingly, this includes the digital, globalised world co-created by AI.

As Balia and Kim (2010:67) note, the digital revolution is profoundly transforming the way humans perceive themselves, interact and communicate. Artificial intelligence – through machine learning, neural networks and generative technologies – accelerates this paradigm shift, creating novel possibilities for connection and dialogue while raising critical ethical and theological questions. Recognising both the promise and the peril, Kim et al. (n.d.) caution that:

AI does not pose an existential threat to humanity, but we must be aware of the concerning ways it is shaping our understandings of God, ourselves, and the world around us. (n.d., no p.)

This awareness sets the stage for reflecting on how the Gospel should be contextually communicated and embodied within this evolving technological frontier.

A new paradigm

Tim Challies (2011:loc. 87, 91) underscores that digital culture, propelled by AI, influences 'the way we see, what we hear, how we interact with the world around us, and how we communicate with others'. Missional theologians such as Bosch (1991:421), Pears (2009:1) and Bevans (2002:3) have long argued that faith is inherently contextual – meaning that theological reflection and Christian witness must engage each new socio-cultural environment. Sweet (2009:165) argues that Christianity spreads itself 'not as a potted plant (most often the "pot" of Western culture) but as seed that takes root and grows in the soil of every culture'.

For Christians, this means digital culture is not a peripheral matter but a central 'mission field' demanding contextualisation. Joubert and Van der Watt (2021:7) make a strong case that 'Digital and non-digital subjectivities, with their often contradictory values, are busy carving out new identities for millions, that is, new biological selves and digital selves'. The Lausanne Movement (Kim et al. n.d.) argues that AI will become ubiquitous and integrated into every aspect of our lives. The new tools and techniques for creative expression provided by AI will deliver significant achievements in art, music and design, and by extension, the ability and possibility to express the Gospel in this emerging culture. Lausanne Movement concludes:

Christians across disciplines can and should harness these tools to help spread the gospel message to unreached or under-reached people groups and to disciple the next generation in the ways of the Lord. But this push to employ these tools must be guided by the unique nature of humanity and the recognition that machines are fundamentally different from humans. (Kim et al. n.d.)

Cyberspace has become our new frontier, one where nearly all traditional boundaries have become porous and blurred. Artificial intelligence is an omnipresent influencer in this space. It is rapidly changing how people live, work, think, interact and also give expression to their faith. People now participate in online business, entertainment, education, religion, medical services, sports, news, shopping, gaming and digital socialisation without the traditional restrictions of time and physical space (Joubert & Van der Watt 2021). Digital faith communities are no longer peripheral but central to modern expressions of faith. As Carey Nieuwhof (2020) points out, 'growing churches in the future will become digital organisations with physical expressions, not physical organisations with a digital presence'.

Contextual theology as incarnation

Following Bevans and Schroeder (2004:31), contextualisation is not optional; it is integral to the Christian mission. Inculturation – and, by extension, inculturation into digital spaces – reflects a commitment to 'embodying' the Gospel so that local communities can encounter Christ in ways meaningful to their lived realities (Niemandt 2024:4). Muswubi (2024:2) describes contextualisation as 'the process of becoming, embodying and/or incarnation of the divine word or text in the human world or context'. For Bosch (1991:426), mission as contextualisation is an affirmation that God has turned towards the world. It is a question of 'reading the signs of the times' (Bosch 1991:428) brought about by digital culture, discerning where the Spirit is working and joining in with the Spirit in a world influenced by AI. Artificial intelligence shapes new forms of communal identity, social interaction and worldview, prompting the church to communicate the Gospel in platforms and languages shaped by digital technology.

The role of 'traders'

Keifert (2006:55) introduces the concept of 'traders', the innovators and early adopters who usher in change by introducing new terminology, ideas and innovations. Within the church, these 'traders' may be theologians, tech-savvy missionaries or lay leaders who discern how AI can facilitate new avenues of evangelisation, discipleship and community formation. At the same time, they must remain vigilant about ethical issues, data privacy and potential biases embedded in AI systems. Yet, traders become agents of creativity and change. They are the ones who innovate, find new routes around bureaucratic obstacles and broker relationships across divides. In short, traders enable the flow of ideas, resources and relationships.

Large systems – whether denominations, universities or entire nations – depend on this interplay between gatekeepers and traders. Where gatekeepers ensure stability and fidelity, traders push frontiers, discover new methods and introduce fresh 'grammar' into established cultures (Niemandt 2017:2–3). This dynamic is particularly relevant in a rapidly changing, AI-driven environment, where new platforms and tools constantly emerge and challenge existing norms. Indeed, as Haight (2014:loc. 1825) observes, God entrusts creation to human beings not merely as caretakers but as co-creators who participate in shaping the future. Such a calling demands an openness to experimentation and responsible risk-taking, qualities epitomised by traders.

Friedman (2016:306, 350) likewise argues that resilient systems are those capable of absorbing diverse influences – immigrants, strangers and outsiders – and weaving them into the fabric of the whole without collapsing. In an 'age of acceleration', churches, mission agencies and believers in all walks of life need to cultivate the trader's capacity to adapt, innovate and welcome difference.

Translatability and flexibility

Contextualisation also raises questions about whether the Christian faith is infinitely flexible or whether an unchanging essence must be preserved. Bosch (1991:362) warns of a 'paradoxical balance': it is impossible to break entirely with one's theological past or to deny continuity with historic Christian tradition. The WCC (2013:72) adds that the Gospel is always 'the story of God's dealings with a particular people and creation, coming to us in the historical person of Jesus Christ', even when expressed in new cultural or linguistic contexts.

Lamin Sanneh's (1989) work on Bible translation illustrates that translatability fosters both cultural ownership and theological depth. By engaging with Scripture in their own languages, communities worldwide gain a fuller understanding and appropriation of the Gospel. In the digital age, AI-driven translation tools – and the broader inculturation of Christianity into online cultures – extend this principle to new frontiers.

Preserving the core

Missional theology insists on faithfulness to the core of the Gospel message. Yet, this faithfulness is upheld precisely by listening attentively to local contexts and adapting expressions accordingly (Sweet 2009:165). While the medium changes – from oral tradition and printed Scripture to digital platforms – the message of redemption in Christ remains constant. Mission in the era of AI, therefore, involves discerning how best to convey the unchanging truths of the faith in an ever-shifting cultural landscape.

In summary, AI is reshaping societies worldwide, producing a new context that calls for a fresh embodiment of the Gospel. Contextualisation in digital culture demands thoughtful engagement, reminding us that the *missio Dei* encompasses every dimension of human experience – including, and perhaps especially, the emerging realities shaped by AI.

Digital ecclesiology

The digital age, enhanced by AI, is reshaping the concept and practice of the church – expanding from physical gatherings to include virtual communities. Virtual communities, online worship and AI-mediated ministries challenge traditional understandings of the body of Christ and the Christian community. This section will explore a broader perspective on ecclesiology.

Redefining the concept and practice of church

'*Annus virtualis* has dawned on all of us ... all of reality plays out on a continuum between virtual and real spaces' (Joubert & Van der Watt 2021:7). This statement captures the profound shift in how we experience and interact with the world in the digital age. The boundaries between the virtual and the real are increasingly blurred, as our lives and relationships seamlessly navigate both spheres. This interplay between

virtual and physical spaces reshapes not only societal dynamics but also the church's mission and ministry. In this continuum, the digital realm is not merely a detached or secondary reality; it is an integral part of human experience. Consequently, the church must actively recognise and faithfully engage in both digital and physical spaces. Digital ministry is not a replacement for offline ministry but an extension of it, enhancing human capacity (Kurlberg, Vo & Afshari n.d.). It is an opportunity to reach people where they are, whether in physical spaces or online. The virtual world and the rise of digital ecclesiology challenges traditional assumptions about embodiment, community and worship, and offers unique possibilities for connection, worship and discipleship that transcend geographic and temporal barriers. Campbell also argues that digital faith practices should not be seen as secondary to physical gatherings but as extensions of networked religion, where believers participate in hybrid faith communities. Campbell expanded on Wellman's concept of networked religion, exploring how the emerging network society shapes contemporary faith (Campbell & Bellar 2023:7). Similarly, Ward (2002:41) also describes the church as a network by referring to the nature of the liquid. 'A church that is liquid will be shaped by a series of flows. The flows represent a myriad of moving and changing connections, that is, a kind of network'. Liquid ecclesiology explains how digital spaces foster flexible and evolving church communities, free from physical constraints. Thompson (2016:63) builds on these perspectives in her work on the virtual body of Christ. She asserts that online church communities are not merely a substitute for in-person worship but can foster real spiritual intimacy:

Incarnational living in the digital age, then, translates into a radical openness within the community of the church not only to hearing the cries of our neighbors but also to imagining new ways of serving neighbors in love through both the virtual and actual worlds. (Thompson 2016:63)

These insights challenge churches to recognise digital ministry as a missional imperative in an AI-driven world.

Digital challenges

However, this new reality also presents challenges. The digital space, while rich with potential, demands careful theological reflection. Questions arise about embodiment, community, power and authenticity in virtual interactions. Can deep spiritual connections be formed online? How does the church maintain its identity and mission in a world where relationships are often mediated by screens? The church's imagination must expand to embrace this continuum as part of its spiritual mandate. Joubert and Van der Watt (2021:7) argue: 'Believers' imagination should intentionally be shifted towards a new understanding of their own online activities as being an integral part of their spiritual lives'.

In this new era, the church has the opportunity to creatively inhabit both the virtual and physical realms, fostering a holistic approach to ministry that is deeply rooted in God's omnipresence and mission. It must bridge the gap between

virtual and real, ensuring that no space is beyond the reach of the Gospel. According to the Lausanne Movement (Kim et al. n.d.), AI technologies have permeated nearly every industry, including religious practices, revolutionising how communities gather and worship. Christians worldwide recognise the immense potential of AI in advancing the spread of the Gospel and have employed AI tools in innovative ways. While caution and discernment are essential, it remains critical for the church to embrace these advancements thoughtfully.

Digital natives

Nderebe (2023:103) highlights the pivotal role of digital natives – Millennials, Gen Z and Gen Alpha – in shaping ecclesial life. With their mastery of digital platforms and content creation, these generations are transforming how the church engages with the digital world. Empowering digital natives to take the lead in shaping the church's digital engagement is not just an opportunity but a necessity. Their deep understanding of online culture uniquely positions them to bridge the gap between traditional ecclesial practices and the digital age. Allowing them to lead fosters a sense of ownership and relevance, enabling the church to connect with younger generations more effectively.

As Oliver (2022:7) warns, failing to embrace these new methods of presenting the Gospel could reduce the church to 'a last sanctuary for elderly people'. By giving digital natives the reins, the church can harness their insights to innovate worship, discipleship and community building in ways that resonate with the digital age. Looking ahead, the future of the church lies in its ability to adapt to evolving digital landscapes while maintaining its core mission and identity. By embracing digital tools and fostering intergenerational collaboration, the church can not only remain relevant but also expand its reach, creating dynamic, hybrid spaces for worship and community that reflect the diversity and complexity of the modern world. This approach ensures that the church remains a transformative force, capable of addressing the spiritual and societal needs of generations to come.

New understanding of ecclesiology

The concept and practice of the church have been fundamentally redefined by the interplay between virtual and physical spaces. The church is no longer confined to traditional, place-based gatherings but now exists on a continuum where digital and physical realities converge. This shift not only expands the church's reach but also affirms that no space, whether virtual or physical, is beyond the transformative power of the Gospel.

Digital ecclesiology demonstrates that the church is not confined to physical spaces but is a dynamic entity capable of thriving within the continuum of physical and virtual realms. In this context, the concept of *homo digitalis* emerges, describing a humanity shaped by the interplay of digital and

physical experiences. This shift challenges traditional paradigms while opening opportunities for creativity, inclusivity and broader reach. This evolution naturally sets the stage for exploring how mission intersects with creativity and AI, emphasising that technological advancements should enhance rather than detract from the church's core mission and identity.

Mission, creativity and artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence offers powerful tools to enhance mission work by creating new avenues for creativity and outreach. We are experiencing a technological super cycle that disrupts and creates new power structures (De Klerk & McLean 2024). However, it is essential that AI serves rather than replaces uniquely human creativity, which fosters deep connection, beauty and truth. In this section, we will examine transcending boundaries with AI, deepening scriptural engagement and creativity in mission.

Transcending boundaries with artificial intelligence

Mission, creativity and AI converge to open unprecedented possibilities for the church in the digital age. Artificial intelligence offers powerful tools to transcend traditional boundaries, connecting people across languages, cultures and backgrounds in ways that were once unimaginable. Through advanced translation and communication technologies, the Gospel can now reach audiences in their native languages, fostering understanding and inclusivity in mission work. Artificial intelligence-driven platforms enable individuals from diverse contexts to engage with biblical truths in ways that resonate with their unique cultural perspectives. The Lausanne Movement speculates:

Imagine vibrant gatherings of believers where people from every tribe and tongue come together to worship, hearing content automatically translated into their own language. Imagine praying as one unified voice and witnessing the preaching of God's Word in signed languages, ensuring that no one is left out. Furthermore, imagine people scattering to the farthest corners of the earth, swiftly finding and connecting with those in search of answers, creating diverse and multi-modal content that reaches the right people at the right time, and boldly proclaiming the name of Jesus where it has never been heard before. (Kim et al. n.d.)

Kurlberg and Phillips (2020:6) explore how digitalisation is reshaping mission and theology, bringing together theologians, missiologists and digital practitioners to examine the implications of AI, online communities and algorithm-driven communication on the church's participation in the *missio Dei*. Hollinghurst (2020:55–56) considers that there are various ways the 'digital Jesus' can be encountered: through the church's online presence, through individual Christians and within so called non-Christian spaces and digital communities. In each context, the gospel emerges as traditional boundaries fall away and believers and seekers engage with these 'seeds of the Logos', fostering an indigenous digital faith.

Deepening scriptural engagement

Beyond accessibility, AI provides tools that enhance how we engage with Scripture, offering deeper insights into its meaning and connections. Artificial intelligence-powered resources, such as Bible study apps and theological databases, help believers uncover patterns, themes and historical contexts within Scripture, enriching their understanding of the Gospel. These technologies not only empower personal spiritual growth but also equip pastors and missionaries with creative strategies for communicating timeless truths in fresh, impactful ways. 'These tools have the potential to revolutionise the way we engage with people, present the Gospel, identify seekers and distribute personalised Christian content' (Kim et al. n.d.).

Studying theology has traditionally required learning ancient languages such as Greek, Hebrew and Latin to conduct proper exegesis. Studying these languages is not only time-consuming and difficult but also expensive, creating significant barriers for many aspiring theologians. However, AI tools are changing this dynamic by making resources and language support more accessible, efficient and affordable. In addition, access to biblical commentaries was often limited, as they were expensive and out of reach for many theologians. Again, AI tools are transforming this landscape in significant ways. When these tools are used responsibly, they create a unique opportunity for discernment and deeper scriptural engagement.

Creativity in mission

Creativity thrives in this new era of mission, as AI enables the development of interactive and immersive experiences that make the Gospel compelling and relatable. Virtual reality (VR) environments for worship, AI-generated media for storytelling and digital discipleship platforms are just a few examples of how technology can be leveraged to inspire and connect. By embracing these innovations, the church can creatively navigate the complexities of a globalised world, ensuring that the message of Christ transcends barriers and remains accessible to all. Artificial intelligence, when used conscientiously, has the potential to transform mission and ministry, aligning the church's work with the *missio Dei* in ways that reflect the inclusivity and reach of God's kingdom.

Summary

Artificial intelligence's transformative potential in mission and creativity lies in its capacity to amplify human ingenuity and foster deeper connections. By transcending boundaries, enhancing scriptural engagement and inspiring innovative outreach strategies, AI can align with the *missio Dei*. As we transition to the 'Discipleship and formation' section, we see that these advancements are most impactful when integrated into holistic strategies that prioritise spiritual growth and relational authenticity.

Discipleship and formation

Artificial intelligence can be a valuable tool for spiritual formation, discipleship and community building, offering possibilities for personalised theological education, virtual fellowship and global outreach. This section focusses on the holistic formation of disciples in a digital age.

Holistic formation

Schmidt and Cohen (2013) predict that by 2025:

[T]he majority of the world's population will, in one generation, have gone from having virtually no access to unfiltered information to accessing all of the world's information through a device that fits in the palm of the hand. (p. 4)

This unprecedented access provides a unique opportunity for the church to rethink its approach to formation because we have seen that it is not merely access to information, but a process of formation.

In *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt (2024) explains how technology, particularly smartphones and social media, is reshaping our habits and development. He notes that 'neurons that fire together, wire together', meaning that activities repeatedly engaging certain neural pathways strengthen those connections (Haidt 2024:96). Haidt (2024) also observes that:

Gen Z became the first generation in history to go through puberty with a portal in their pockets that called them away from the people nearby and into an alternative universe that was exciting, addictive, unstable, and – as I will show – unsuitable for children and adolescents. (p. 6)

These insights illustrate how pervasive technology use can shape habits, behaviours and even neural pathways, underscoring the profound impact of digital environments on personal formation. The question is: what will these environments look like with the church's intentional presence? Can technology and AI be leveraged for spiritual formation? Estes (2018) explores these implications, stating that tech shapes our lives and our world and the importance of critical thinking when embracing these new possibilities.

The Lausanne Movement emphasises that the proclamation of the Gospel is not merely about transferring knowledge but about facilitating whole-person transformation – engaging the mind, heart and spirit through the work of the Holy Spirit (Kim et al. n.d.). Throughout history, Christians have embraced technological advancements – from the printing press, which enabled mass Bible distribution, to radio and television, which expanded the reach of evangelism. These tools were not just methods for transmitting information but became catalysts for transformation, enabling the Gospel to penetrate new contexts and cultures. Similarly, today's digital and AI-driven technologies offer opportunities to shape disciples. This holistic approach ensures that the Gospel impacts not only what people know but also how they live, love and align their desires with God's purposes.

It reminds us that the Gospel is about forming Christ-like disciples, not just informed believers.

Thompson (2016:13) gives a personal account of how the virtual body of Christ had an influence on her own life and how she was shaped by it. She thus affirms the importance of seeing virtual reality as 'continuous rather than discontinuous with embodied existence, it becomes clear that at times virtual interactions can be even more beneficial – and therefore incarnational – than face-to-face ones' (Thompson 2016:13). Virtual faith communities can provide meaningful spiritual formation. These perspectives reinforce the need for churches to view AI and digital tools as partners in discipleship rather than competitors to traditional ministry.

Artificial intelligence, humility and mission from the margins

The concluding section of this research emphasises the critical role of humility in engaging with AI in missional praxis and the necessity of attending to voices from the margins. This serves as a corrective in the reflection on the possibilities and opportunities presented by AI.

Bold humility: Bosch's framework

Mission, in line with the wise counsel of the late David Bosch, is a life of adventure that requires bold humility and cruciform praxis (Kritzinger & Saayman 2011:6, 127). This phrase encapsulates the essence of missional engagement: an unshakeable confidence in the Gospel's transformative power, coupled with a humble acknowledgement of human limitations and self-sacrificing love. The concept of vulnerability serves us well in discerning the way forward in our mission. This humility is especially pertinent in the context of AI, which often magnifies the allure of power – be it computational power, control over data or influence through algorithmic systems.

Bold humility and vulnerability remind us that mission is not about wielding power but about serving. This orientation stands in stark contrast to the implicit power dynamics embedded in AI technologies, where immense computational capabilities often overshadow the relational and incarnational aspects of the mission. Technology in general, and AI in particular, is not neutral. The shadow of technocracy follows it. De Klerk and McLean (2024) argue from a techno-realistic viewpoint that technologies come loaded with intended and unintended social, political and economic power. Mission, then, calls for a countercultural stance: a refusal to equate power – including 'computing power' – with value or success. Instead, it demands a focus on vulnerability, relationality and mutual dependence.

With the emergence of the Digital Word, the WCC affirmation on the nature of the Gospel gains new meaning – 'We affirm that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news in all ages and places and should be proclaimed in the Spirit of love and humility' (WCC 2013:39). Louw (2023) explains the challenge to *homo digitalis*:

The metaverse challenges spiritual and religious thought to rethink itself, not in terms of deistic determinism and imperialism, but in terms of religious networking and healing synergy between divine compassion and human vulnerability. (p. 156)

Tools, not beings: Lausanne's insight

The Lausanne Movement's reflections on AI stress a critical theological and ethical distinction: AI tools are creations, not beings. Artificial intelligence creates power imbalances, and we need a techno-critique in reflecting on these tools of technology. While these technologies may imitate human-like abilities, they cannot possess the *imago Dei* – the unique image of God bestowed upon humanity.

As highlighted in the Lausanne article *AI and the Future of Mission* (Cozens 2024), AI systems are fundamentally tools designed to serve human creativity and missional efforts, not autonomous agents capable of moral reasoning or spiritual discernment. Lausanne's article *Artificial Intelligence: An Evangelical Statement of Principles* affirms that no part of creation, including AI, should usurp the dominion and stewardship entrusted to humanity by God.

Artificial intelligence, however advanced, remains a reflection of human ingenuity – a set of tools designed to perform tasks, analyse data and augment human capacities. Unlike humans, AI lacks consciousness, moral agency and the spiritual depth inherent in the *imago Dei*. This distinction underscores a fundamental truth: while AI can be harnessed for mission, it must always remain subordinate to human creativity, discernment and ethical guidance. Mission shaped by AI must resist the temptation to assign undue value to technological innovations, keeping human dignity and the Kingdom of God at the centre.

The question of humanity

The advent of AI invites renewed reflection on the question, 'What does it mean to be human?' As technological advancements blur the boundaries between human and machine capacities, the Christian understanding of humanity's unique nature provides clarity. Joubert (2020:6) warns that technology can turn into a dangerous master and that more and more people are forced to fit the requirements of soulless technologies. The rights and needs of 'embodied humans' must be emphasised more than ever (Joubert 2020:6). Grounded in Genesis 1:26–28, the *imago Dei* affirms humanity's unique role as stewards of creation and relational beings called to reflect God's triune character.

This theological anthropology rejects any elevation of AI to the level of human identity, worth or dignity. Instead, it emphasises the exceptional status of humanity as God's partners in mission. It restores human agency. Key aspects of the exercise of human agency include:

- The ability to take purposeful action and to anticipate the likely outcomes of actions in advance (forethought).

- The ability to align one's actions with personal values and goals (self-regulation).
- The capacity to critically evaluate one's own behaviour and progress (self-reflexivity) (Adendorf & Joubert 2025).

Human agency contrasts with AI models, which independently perform tasks by mimicking human behaviour, making decisions and responding to data inputs (Adendorf & Joubert 2025). Artificial intelligence must be viewed as a tool that supports, rather than replaces, the human vocation of embodying God's love, justice and creativity in the world. Louw (2023:225) elegantly states: 'The religious question that the metaverse articulates in an intensified way is, in my view, a pastoral matter of care and compassion, not an abstract rational or dogmatic issue'.

Mission from the margins: Listening to the excluded

The concept of *mission from the margins*, as articulated in the WCC document *Together Towards Life* (WCC 2013:15–16), provides a critical lens for engaging AI in mission. De Klerk and McLean (2024:8) remind us that technology is not neutral; its design, use and content are shaped by the Global North, leading to power imbalances and dominance over the Global South. Marginalised communities – those often excluded from technological advancements – offer unique insights into the exclusionary structures perpetuated by AI. These voices can expose the centralising tendencies of AI systems, which frequently consolidate power and exacerbate inequalities.

Mission from the margins teaches that the marginalised are not merely recipients of aid but prophetic agents of transformation. They discern what is life-affirming and life-destroying in ways that those at the centre often cannot (WCC 2013:15–16). Justice, solidarity and inclusivity – key expressions of *mission from the margins* – challenge the church to advocate for ethical AI that benefits all people, especially those most vulnerable to exclusion.

Lessons from the margins

Mission from the margins teaches the church to approach AI with humility and attentiveness. Louw (2023:415) refers to the metaphysics of life, where compassion, empathy and sympathy are the lifelines for meaningful engagement with life's challenges.

The margins and wounding invite us to:

- **Prioritise justice:** Advocate for AI systems that address systemic inequalities rather than exacerbate them. Embrace a technocritical stance that identifies the limitations and prospective ethical and social harms of AI.
- **Critical engagement:** Critical theory can assist in confronting the power dynamics associated with AI and promoting advocacy that challenges injustice, '... viewing discomfort and difficult questions as catalysts for productive dialogue' (De Klerk & McLean 2024).

- **Embrace vulnerability:** Recognise the limitations of human and technological power, affirming God's sufficiency in mission.
- **Foster community:** Use AI to build relationships and support inclusive digital spaces that reflect the body of Christ.
- **Learn from the margins through reflexive dialogue:** Value the insights and resilience of marginalised communities as indispensable to ethical AI practices. Reflexive dialogue encourages individuals to critically examine their positionality, power and privileges in conversations (De Klerk & McLean 2024).

As the church engages with AI, it must remember that mission is not a one-way movement from power to weakness but a collaborative journey that honours the agency and wisdom of all participants. The marginalised, often overlooked in AI discourses, offer essential correctives to its centralising tendencies, reminding us that the fullness of life is for all.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence presents both challenges and opportunities for the *missio Dei*. It is reshaping societies, creating a new frontier for mission and ecclesiology. From the insights of digital ecclesiology, we see the church's adaptive capacity to inhabit both physical and virtual spaces, leveraging these realms to connect, worship and build community. This duality highlights the church's enduring commitment to contextualisation and mission across evolving landscapes.

Mission and creativity, as enhanced by AI, underscore the profound opportunities to transcend barriers, deepen scriptural engagement and inspire innovative expressions of the Gospel. These tools, while transformative, must remain subordinate to the guiding principles of relationality, compassion and the unique role of human creativity in God's mission. The final call to discipleship and formation invites the church to leverage AI for holistic spiritual growth – engaging the mind, heart and spirit while fostering genuine connections.

Engaging AI in bold humility, grounded in the *imago Dei* and informed by the wisdom of the margins, allows the church to navigate this new digital frontier faithfully. As Joubert (2020:6) notes, Christianity possesses a deep well of wisdom embedded in sacred texts, liturgies, memories and embodied experiences. This timeless reservoir has guided believers throughout history to discern what it means to be truly human and how to flourish in the presence of God and others. By centring justice, inclusivity and human dignity, the church can ensure that AI serves as a tool for God's life-giving mission rather than a force for exclusion or oppression.

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Authors' contributions

C.J.P.N. and D.N. collaborated closely in the research and publication of this article. Together, they conceptualised the study, jointly formulating the research problem and questions, as well as conducting the analyses. They shared the investigative process, including the review of relevant literature and co-wrote the final manuscript. Resources were equally shared throughout the research endeavour. As the senior researcher, C.J.P.N. provided supervision and guidance, ensuring the integrity and academic rigour of the study.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its references.

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