

Installation for Rosemary Dawson
September 21, 2025
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Acts 6:1-7
John 15:1-8

This past week, the **New York Times** published an article, *Finding God in the App Store: Millions are turning to chatbots for guidance from on high*. Lauren Jackson, the reporter, wrote, “On religious apps, tens of millions of people are confessing to spiritual chatbots their secrets: their petty vanities and deepest worries, gluttonous urges and darkest impulses. Trained on religious texts, the bots are like on-call priests, imams or rabbis, offering comfort and direction at any time. On some platforms, they even purport to channel God.”¹

The article printed excerpts from conversations between chatbots and their users. Here’s an example: A user asked, “Is it a sin to break the seventh day Sabbath?” The reply, “In the eyes of God, my child, it is not so much about the specific day, but the spirit of the Sabbath - a day of rest and worship. Jesus said, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27). This means the Sabbath is a gift, not a burden. Let’s focus on honoring God and finding rest in Him, regardless of the day.” Condescending and a little shallow, but OK.

One person reported that she uses a spiritual app to help her with her prayers. Another woman used her app to prepare for her mother’s impending death. These chatbots tend to be affirming, which one user noted was more supportive than her own church when she struggled with her health.

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/14/us/chatbot-god.html?unlocked_article_code=1.mE8.MW0E.Cf0YvMXrr4HL&smid=url-share
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The creators did not develop these apps as a substitute for church. They saw them as supplementing in-person relationships, which could get people who have stepped away from the church to re-enter. Though that may be the intention, I'm not sure if that's realistic.

That these apps exist are more significant to me than whether or not they will bring disaffected people back to the church. Granted that this past week I've been feeling inundated with church work (I failed retirement and am doing a bridge ministry), so I haven't had a chance to play out their implications. I believe, though, this is likely a game changer for us as clergy.

Whatever the implications, this is a new data point in the religious landscape. Clergy and congregations would be remiss for not reflecting upon this new development. A couple of my wondering questions. "With the chatbot offering generally anodyne affirmative answers, how will that shape people's expectation of faith over time?" Or "If parishioners start using them in the pews as a 'check' on the readings or the sermon, how might we integrate these chatbots into worship?"

In the history of the church, change is not new. As we all know, the church has from its very beginning confronted change.

Luke substantially documented the church's evolution in Acts. We lose the full history of that evolution because the stories from Acts appear in our Sunday readings only during Eastertide. Following Jesus' ascension, the disciples had to figure out this Jesus movement. He didn't leave them with a detailed plan to grow this movement into a religion. Almost every chapter raised a new data point for the disciples.

We know from Acts 2 that the movement had spread beyond Galilee and Jerusalem. The disciples, though, had a provincial perspective and, thus, were caught off guard when the Greek disciples confronted them about ignoring their widows. Their resolution accomplished two

things. First, it established a diaconate and implicitly created offices of what would become the church. Second, it pushed them beyond their provincialism to take an active role in serving people beyond their perceived geography. This confrontation was a new data point for the Galilee-Jerusalem crowd, which led to the movement's continued expansion.

That was one of many data points for the movement. Data points have arisen throughout the Church's two millennia. Some of the data points have been external, such as the printing press or the organ. Some internal such as Isaac Watts's hymns, which changed hymnody. More recent data points would be the internet and Covid.

We have responded over time to factors both external and internal. We have incorporated data points, such as organs for our music and Covid for on-line worship and meetings. We have relinquished practices such as coming to church on both Sunday mornings and afternoons and lining out our hymns.

A footnote about grape growing. When you go to a wine vineyard, look closely at the vines. They grow on trellises comprised of horizontal wires. The vine begins as a thick gnarly stock which branches in a T-formation at the trellis' first wire. Canes, then, grow upwards from the stock. The grapes grow on the canes. The vinedresser removes all the canes except for one or two so the energy to grow the grapes does not dissipate among several canes. This way the grapes swell with juice, which ultimately becomes our wine.

Jesus' vine metaphor reminded the disciples to prune so we do not dissipate our energy, which allows for continued and vigorous growth.

The data points can be small, seemingly subtle changes over time, such as a smaller and aging congregation, an aging general population in our communities, a more spiritually diverse and diffused religious landscape, or a building that doesn't serve our ministries well. They can be

large dramatic changes, too. Remember Karl Barth's admonition, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible."²

As local churches, how much energy do we have? When we think about the grapes we wish to produce, which canes will we keep and which canes will we prune? The answers will come from the Holy Spirit, not a chatbot.

Yesterday, I presided over a funeral. During the reception an older gentleman asked for my thoughts on how to bring our churches back to what they were, which I'm guessing would be the 1950s and 1960s. I replied that our present spiritual landscape is very different from generations before. I said the church needs to be better at articulating our fundamental values because our community is adrift.

This conversation lingered in my head and just before going to bed, I realized I had to remind myself of what that vine was and how the vine needs to be now. Of course, caring for the people who were sick, calling out hypocrisy among the elites, and advocating for the people without economic or political power were obvious. However, Jesus' meta-message overturned the ways of the secular world, the Empire, to proclaim a world where the last shall be first and the first shall be last, where peace comes from sharing the bread and the cup not instruments of violence and destruction, where wealth is not how much we have but how much we give away.

The "now" is what we've been seeing over the past several weeks, which came to a head last week with Jimmy Kimmel's firing and the resolution overwhelmingly passed by the House of Representatives honoring Charlie Kirk. That vote included 95 Democrats in favor.

When the people's body honors a man who by all accounts was a misogynistic racist, it makes crystal clear that this nation has lost its sense of life-giving values. If I were on television

² <https://sinibaldo.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/on-barth-the-bible-and-the-newspaper/>
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or even if I worked in some corporation and publicly proclaimed what I just said, I might not have a job tomorrow.

That's why we need the church. That's why we need to prune our vines because in this climate today, here in the church people can learn, be reminded, and proclaim the values which are fundamental to creating true peace, the realm of God on earth. We have an obligation to be even more intentional to speak truth to power, especially when the government seeks to quell messages contrary to its vision for this nation. A vision that demonizes and erases queer people, that sanitizes our discomforted past, that promotes systemic racism, that increases wealth for the haves on the backs of the have-nots.

The church has a critical role to play today, perhaps more so than a decade ago. The church is our hope today, right now, because the media landscape, predominantly run by large corporations which want to secure their profits, are pulling punches due to government pressure. We are the beacon of truth. We are the repository of timeless life-giving values to strengthen and sustain true community where the common good prevails and where perfect love casts out fear. Furthermore, we are only beholden to God.

We are the church. We are the vine. Let's prune our canes so our vine will thrive.

Rev. Quentin Chin