



The New Church Newsletter

Hurstville Society March 2018

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They're Coming... Robot Priests!

By Rev Todd Beiswenger

For at least ten years now, the General Church has been concerned about a lack of priests. This led to an initiative to recruit men who were interested in changing careers and joining the ministry. I came through on that program, but this new initiative is much bolder in an attempt to bolster our ranks. Yes, get ready for the robot priest. I'm sure many of you will be surprised by this, but the Bishop lays out a pretty reasonable case for it. In a statement to the clergy he wrote,

“Innovation is the key to church growth. In a world where we are more and more connected through electronic means, having digital, robotic priests will only help enhance our ability to connect with younger generations and ensure that the message of the New Church continues to spread around the world.”

He goes on to talk about reaching out into areas where Christianity is growing, but we have little to no presence. With robo-priest there are no immigration issues. Importing a robot is as simple as shipping a computer or a piece of luggage. No lawyers involved, and so you can put a robot just about anywhere in the world in a matter of days. There are plenty of other practical advantages too: training doesn't take three or four years. Need it to speak a language other than English? No problem. Need it to be part of the musical offering? Easy. Whatever the problem is, just import some files, make some customizations, the new robo-priest is ready to go in days, sometimes hours.

At first though, these robots will only be used to assist human priests. Because they're able to comb through all the texts so quickly, they will be able to answer any theological question almost instantly. No longer will a priest or layperson have to waste time searching for that elusive passage. But as we get more acclimated to the robo-priest it is expected that they'll take on a larger role, including offering blessings, officiating weddings, and even pastoral visits. You'll be amazed at the quality of conversation they can have!

Okay, so I made all of that up. The crazy thing is that while I'm hearing of all sorts of ways robots are going to be integrated into our lives, until recently I hadn't heard about robots doing religious work. Believe it or not, what I've found is that my fictitious opening isn't as far from reality as I thought. It turns out that in 2016 a Buddhist temple on the edge of Beijing developed a robot monk who can chant mantras and explain basic tenets of faith. It's about the same height as Yoda, standing at 2 feet tall. While Yoda is green, Xian'er is encased in saffron-yellow robes and has a shaved head. Despite spending much of his time closeted in the spiritual calm of Longquan Temple, he wears an expression of permanent surprise.

His purpose is to reach out to people who are more connected to their smartphones than their inner being. Xian'er can answer 20 simple questions, displayed on the touch-screen on his chest, about Buddhism and daily life at the 500-year-old temple. Master Xianfian, a (human) monk at Longquan and Xian'er's creator, said artificial intelligence could be harnessed to spread Buddhist wisdom in China. The robot made appearances at a number of tech shows, generated a lot of publicity, but apparently now spends most of its life on an office shelf in deep meditation.

The Germans weren't to be outdone in the endeavour to robotize religion though. Their robot, called BlessU-2, is intended to trigger debate about the future of the church and the potential of artificial intelligence. "We wanted people to consider if it is possible to be blessed by a machine, or if a human being is needed," Stephan Krebs of the Protestant church in Hesse and Nassau, which is behind the initiative.

BlessU-2 stands around 5.5 feet tall, and looks like an arcade machine with a head and arms attached to it. It has offered blessings in a choice of German, English, French, Spanish or Polish. Worshippers can choose between a male or female voice. The robot raises its arms, flashes lights, recites a biblical verse and says: "God bless and protect you." If requested, it will provide a printout of its words. A backup robot is available in case of breakdown. "The idea is to provoke debate," said Krebs. "People from the street are curious, amused and interested. They are really taken with it, and are very positive. But inside the church some people think we want to replace human pastors with machines. Those that are church-oriented are more critical."

Despite a Europe-wide shortage of priests, the Protestant church of Europe has no intention of using robots to fill the gap. But my fictitious opening to this article is actually

based in reality. That's because in Japan they too have got into the robo-priest game and created their robot named "Pepper."

This humanoid robot has put itself up for hire as a Buddhist priest for funerals. They've taken the German blessing bot idea and taken it to a whole new level. Pepper's new code will let it chant sutras in a computerised voice while tapping a drum, providing a cheaper alternative to a human priest to see your loved ones off into the eternal sleep. The cost of hiring Pepper is about 80% less than the cost of hiring a human priest to run the funeral. With Japan's population ageing and shrinking, many Buddhist priests receive less financial support from their communities, prompting some to find part-time work outside their temple duties, said Michio Inamura, Nissei's executive adviser, who suggested Pepper could step in when a human wasn't available. Would-be funeral arrangers have the option to deck Pepper out in the robe of a Buddhist monk and can even live-stream the ceremony to those who can't attend the funeral in person.

Pepper has yet to be hired to conduct a funeral, but with robots slowly creeping into most facets of life it seems inevitable they will be involved in religion and the church sooner or later. For me, all of this brings up the question of what it is to be human. Academics, philosophers and the like have put forward all sorts of ideas, including having "heart," "empathy," or "spirit." The Writings give us a different answer as to what it is to be human: "for a person is human because of intelligence and wisdom - essentially truth and good respectively - which people have solely from the Lord" (AC 2305).

In other places we are taught that our freedom and rationality are big parts of being human, as is having a will and understanding. But there's more to it. There's a connection between higher and lower planes that is essential to our humanity. This quote from True Christianity illustrates how our humanity is integrated into the various aspects of our life.

"...if we had no free choice in spiritual matters, we would have no free choice in civic, moral, and earthly matters either, this stands to reason from the fact that the spiritual things that are called theological dwell in the highest region of the human mind, just as the soul dwells in the body. That is where such things live, because the door through which the Lord "comes in to us" [Revelation 3:20] is on that level. Beneath them are civic, moral, and earthly concerns, which in human beings receive all their life from the spiritual qualities that reside above. Because the life from the Lord flows in at the highest level and because our life consists of the power to freely think and will, and therefore speak and act, it follows that our free choice in politics and earthly matters comes exclusively from our spiritual freedom. Our sense of what is good and true and what is just and upright in civic matters comes from that spiritual freedom; and this sense is the very essence of true intellect" (True Christianity 482)

The Lord isn't telling us that if we just program a will and understanding into a robot that we'll have a human. He's telling us that all of these things have to be in place and connected back to Him in order to receive life. We need that "door" for the Lord to enter into our soul and mind. Silicon chips just don't receive the Lord's life the way a human does. People were created in God's image and likeness, not an assembly of plastic, silicon and electronic gadgetry. As a result, I just don't see how robots can pass on God's

blessing, His Word, or His Love in the same way that a person can. These things are to flow through us to others. A robot just can't do that.

The robots are coming, there's no doubt. They'll be driving us around, diagnosing our illnesses, and flipping our burgers, but I'm quite happy to see that the world hasn't gone so mad as to hire Pepper to perform funerals.

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Harvest/Journey Program Wrap Up

We'll have a harvest-themed worship service on Sunday, **March 11th**, coinciding with the closure of our current Journey spiritual growth program. As usual we're going to have a pot-luck lunch following the service as we have harvest celebration. In addition to counting our many blessings, you are again invited to share the wealth by *bringing non-perishable food and toiletry items to benefit those in need, via **Kogarah Storehouse***. Let's show them how big our hearts are!

Although the last Sunday service on the Practicing Forgiveness theme will be on Sunday, March 11th, there will still be a small group meeting that Monday, March 12th, *as well as a final class* the following Monday, March 19th, to report back on how our week went -- and to celebrate the successful completion of the program together! We'll have some snacks, drinks and/or desserts on hand for a mini-celebration.

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Easter Church Services

Sunday March 25 th	10am	Palm Sunday family service
Friday March 30 th	7pm	Good Friday vesper + Holy Supper service
Sunday April 1 st	10am	Easter family service

(that's no joke!)

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Pulpit Swap!

For what is likely to be his last time preaching at our church, **Rev. Julian Duckworth** will be taking the service on March 18th. Need I say any more?

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Perth Visit

As usual, going out to Perth for a weekend is a busy affair. I caught a 9:30 flight that was about an hour late getting off the ground, landing me in Perth around 12:30 or so. I picked up a hire car and did some visiting the rest of the day, not getting to Mary Smuts' place until around 9pm.

The next day we held an AGM, lunch, a couple of classes (one that was run at camp, one that I'd previously done in Hurstville) and then was back out visiting again.



While I do enjoy all the pastoral visiting, the highlight was the next day because with the church service I was honoured to baptize **Oliver Stephen Smuts**, the second child of **Jason & Chelsea Smuts**. Little Oliver is about 7 months old, and was happily baptised. He started to gnaw on my hand during the blessing, but I took it as an endearing gnaw. It was probably one of the longest services I've done as it included a children's talk, a baptism, adult talk and holy supper all in one. They got their money's worth out of me.

Then it was lunch and time to head to the airport, getting home around 11pm.

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While the Pastor Was Away

There's a good tradition here of continuing on even when there isn't a pastor in town. When I go to Perth, there's usually a lay-led service that is taken by one of our volunteers. Well, as things worked out this time **Ros Taylor** was in town the weekend I was away. She's done a lot of training in New Church theology, and has a long standing love for the Hurstville church, so we wanted to find a way for her to help out in my absence while still working within the rules of organizational policy.

The end result was that **Cliff Adamou** led a short worship service for us, which was followed by **Ros** leading a discussion on the topic of correspondences in nature. Since our group was going to head off to Oatley Park afterwards for a swim, it seemed an ideal time to talk about the relationship between heaven and nature. By all reports Cliff and Ros did a fine job, and I know that they both felt that it was a rewarding experience for them. Thanks to all who were able to come out!

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Tennis

Did you know that we have a vibrant schedule on the Baringa tennis court, these days? We've got a youth group that plays on Saturday mornings. March 8th will be the last day for them for the season, hopefully resuming in early May. Competitive ladies' groups play on Tuesdays and Thursdays, social mixed groups play on Friday mornings and Saturday afternoons, and there is a competitive youth group which plays on Saturday mornings, resuming from the summer holiday on Feb 10. The social groups always welcome new players (preferably with some experience), particularly on Friday mornings. If you have

any interest, please let **Jenn** know, or come by any Friday morning at 9:30am or Saturday afternoon at 1pm! Cost is \$5 per event.

Birthdays

Happy Birthday to **Don Macfarlane** (7th), **Debbie Walsh** (7th), **Graham Horner** (12th), **Edward Horner** (18th)

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