



2023

## New Members

James F. McGrath  
*Butler University*, [jfmcgrat@butler.edu](mailto:jfmcgrat@butler.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers)



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McGrath, James F., "New Members" *A Hero of a Different Stripe (Hemelein Publications and LTUE Press, 2023)*. / (2023): -.

Available at [https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers/1441](https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/1441)

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

## New Members

By James F. McGrath

"*This* is your plan to increase church attendance?!"

The elders of First Presbyterian Church all had similar looks on their faces, but as usual it was Mr. Kryczek who voiced what most if not all of them were thinking.

Rev. Salazar smiled in his usual genial manner. His back was to the sanctuary of their historic church building as he stood facing the church elders with their skeptical and shocked faces. Behind him, the high vaulted ceiling, gothic-style arches, ornately carved oak paneling, and stained glass windows represented a historic beauty. While once such churches had been relatively commonplace, they now increasingly seemed like a rare and precious heirloom, or an antiquated relic of a bygone era. More and more churches were cutting costs by renting space in buildings owned by others for their Sunday morning services. Those that could afford a building of their own tended to opt for something much more compact and practical than had been the norm two centuries earlier, when First Presbyterian Church had been constructed. Its beauty made it a popular venue for

weddings, yet its antique appearance had less and less appeal in terms of its ability to draw a consistent weekly attendance even from its members on the books, never mind visitors. Its organ pipes were immediately recognizable as extremely high quality to those who were familiar with such instruments. Even those with no specialized expertise were impressed by their sound and the building's marvelous acoustics. But organ music was arguably even less popular these days than gothic architecture.

On this particular day, however, something else caught one's eye in the church, instead of the white marble baptistry or the multicolored sunlight dappling the interior that usually drew one's gaze. Roughly 1/4 of the pews, mostly towards the front of the sanctuary, were occupied by humanoid robots. Their metallic heads and shoulders reflected the multicolored light streaming through the windows, producing an incandescent effect that some might consider beautiful. At the same time it seemed as incongruous in that setting as a large projection screen or illuminated disco ball might have. Both of those additions - a large screen and a disco ball - had in fact been proposed at some point in the church's long history, although one of the proposals had been made more frequently, and more seriously, than the other. Neither had met with the approval of the church's elders. Proposals for those sorts of changes to the

physical building itself fell under the purview of the board of elders. Filling the pews, on the other hand, was widely agreed to be the minister's responsibility. Whenever church attendance lagged or no increase in membership was seen for a long time, the question of whether a new minister was needed always came up.

What they saw before them today, however, was not what any of them had been looking for when they had voiced their concerns about dwindling attendance over the past couple of years. "I hope you don't think that this is my end goal - cold metallic posteriors in pews. Not at all," Rev. Salazar told them. On closer inspection (the committee inevitably wandered down the center aisle to take a look), the robots were of a variety of models, some of them familiar from stores and offices and even the church office, ever since the congregation had begrudgingly acknowledged that a robot answering the phones and greeting unexpected visitors made more economic and practical sense than keeping a human being sitting there all day, every day.

"What then?" asked Mr. Antolik, the church treasurer. The committee had put a lot of trust in Rev. Salazar when he had asked that a portion of the next few months' budget be designated towards an "attendance drive" that the minister had insisted would bring fast results, yet the details of which he

wanted to keep a surprise. Salazar had insisted that the minutes from the elders' meeting approving the budget line should include a statement to the effect that, if the church's attendance did not increase substantially within a year, the minister himself would repay the allocated money from his own salary or savings, and if the church desired, submit his resignation. That had persuaded everyone present to be willing to take the risk, whatever it turned out to be. They had nothing to lose financially, and unwillingness to try new things would surely end with the church closing within at most a decade or two, as so many other congregations already had.

"I'm sure you're all aware of the recent legal decision allowing machines to be considered persons," Salazar said. "I suspect that some of you may have thought, when walking into the sanctuary today, that I was playing some sort of prank on you based on that news. It is the beginning of April, after all. No one - not the lawyers, not the philosophers, not the wider public, and certainly not me - is under the illusion that the court is saying that robots are *conscious*, that they have *souls* or anything like that. Their status as persons is the same sort of legal fiction that allows a corporation to have the status of a person. Nothing more than that. But corporations cannot fill

our pews. What other churches seem not to have noticed yet is that robots *can*."

"But, but, robots aren't going to put money in the offering plate!" Frank Kovac interrupted, convinced by this stage that whatever Salazar had intended, whether joke or serious-yet-hairbrained scheme, they had humored him for long enough.

"Of course not. You can't seriously think that I was hoping that we could make up for our dwindling numbers with mechanical replacements for lost members - even though I'm sure that each of us can probably think of a few individuals in whose case replacement with a robot would be an improvement!" The committee members mostly smiled, none of them considering the possibility that he might have them in mind when he said this. The joke succeeded in breaking the palpable tension at least slightly.

"What then?" Antolik asked again.

"How many of you read the article I circulated to you about the biggest challenge to attracting new members to churches?" Salazar asked them. Most avoided eye contact, but a few nodded that they had. "What is at the top of the list? Does anyone remember?"

It was Jan Horvath who offered the answer after only the slightest pause. "Membership statistics are public these days.

Everyone looks to see how popular and well-attended a church already is before deciding even to visit, never mind attend regularly or consider becoming a member. If your membership has a downward trend, no matter the reason, you will also see a decline in visitors. From there, it becomes a vicious circle, a downward spiral that churches can rarely break out of."

"Precisely," Salazar exclaimed, impressed with his recall and with the precise summary he had provided. "Well, not only our attendance but our membership has just increased dramatically."

"They're *members*?!" Antolik asked, shocked. "Since when?"

"Since this morning. After I signed the paperwork for the shipment when they were delivered, I personally baptized every one of them. Obviously this isn't an option that would work for Baptists..." Salazar's joke got even bigger laughs this time. Being a Presbyterian church, they baptized through sprinkling, and even the least expensive models of robots were sufficiently waterproof to cope with that. Full immersion in water, on the other hand, could have significant impacts on all but the most expensive models.

"But this won't fool anyone!" Kovac spluttered. "Even if droves of people show up next Sunday to see what has led to the

sudden dramatic increase in attendance, they'll take one look, laugh or shake their heads, and head for the door."

"I sincerely doubt that," Salazar said. "In fact, I'm tempted to circulate some video to show what will be happening here on Sunday and give people a taste of what to expect. It might draw even bigger crowds. But I think the effect will be even better in person."

"Effect of what?" Antolik asked, genuinely puzzled. "Shock? Curiosity?"

"I felt I had to show you this much, so that you wouldn't raise a fuss on Sunday morning and undermine what I have planned," Salazar said. "But having already invested in my effort as an act of faith and trust, I ask you to humor me just a few more days. I don't want to rob you entirely of the chance to be as impressed as complete newcomers will be this coming Sunday morning. Indeed, given the skepticism many if not all of you feel, I think your reactions on Sunday will be even better than those of newcomers. It will be a service that you will want to invite friends to, and I promise you will have no regrets if you do so."

The committee members asked a few more questions, but at this point Salazar became evasive, insisting that it was better for them to wait and see.

#

On Sunday morning, Jan Horvath was the first of the committee members to arrive at the church. He wasn't especially early - no one normally arrived particularly long before the service began even if they were involved in some way. He was immediately struck by the number of cars already in the parking lot, and a small crowd that had already gathered outside. The main doors were open, but a velvet rope had been placed across the entrance indicating that they should wait there. All those present seemed to be newcomers. Horvath headed for the back entrance, to which he had a key, giving the crowd a wide berth. They all seemed transfixed by something, but from where he was he couldn't see what it was. All he could make out from this distance, as he headed for the small door on the far side of the church, was that they seemed to have their attention drawn towards the open doors. He was tall enough that he could see over most of them, yet he saw nothing immediately inside the entrance that might have accounted for their seemingly rapt attention. There was certainly no sign of a robot bouncer or anything like that.

Horvath entered the church building, and as he made his way through the hall of Sunday school classrooms at the far end of the building and towards the sanctuary, he began to hear singing. He stopped and listened, even though the sound wasn't carrying well to where he was. What he heard was not their church choir. To be completely honest, when the word "choir" was used in reference to their usual small group of singers who occasionally facilitated worship, it deserved to be in scare quotes. None of the voices of its members was particularly *bad*, but the group had an excess of basses, no decent tenors, and simply sounded weak and unbalanced. What he was hearing now sounded professional.

Horvath started walking again, picking up his pace. When he reached the doors to the sanctuary he stopped in his tracks again. Standing at the front, *dressed in choir robes*, were a significant number of the robots that had been seated in the pews a few days earlier, when the minister had first unveiled them to the committee. They were *singing* - or, if that wasn't the right word, they were producing the beautiful sound of singing, each individually, and together in exquisite harmony. Rev. Salazar was standing at the back of the sanctuary near the left hand side. He appeared to be engrossed in the music himself, much as Horvath now realized that the crowd gathering

outside must likewise be. Horvath thought of several things he might say. Some were skeptical. Some were attempts at humor. But eventually only one thing seemed appropriate.

"It's beautiful," he said.

Salazar nodded. "Some of the best voices in human history," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Recordings of them have been in the public domain for quite some time. Academics and voice teachers have been studying and debating them for quite some time as well. It was surprisingly straightforward to download the data about the voices and use their qualities as the pattern for the voices of our robots."

Horvath had been a music student at university, even though he hadn't pursued it professionally after graduation. He couldn't quite place the piece that was currently being sung, although it was somewhat familiar. But when the tenor solo began, he recognized the voice immediately as patterned on that of Enrico Caruso. But it wasn't a recording of Caruso, nor was it even a precise simulation of Caruso's voice. It had started with that, he could tell, but then had been enriched by an AI that analyzed other famous voices and drew on their shared characteristics to produce something unique and distinctive.

He couldn't bring himself to say another word for some time. He simply stared and listened. Spending these moments thinking about the computing behind these sounds would be to squander an incredible auditory experience that he knew deserved his undivided attention. It deserved his awe and rapture as well. When that piece for choir and tenor finished, the organ began to play. Horvath moved forward so as to be able to peer up towards the balcony under which they had been standing, since it was there that the church's pipe organ was located. A robot sat at the keyboard. It was playing the intro to "Les Rameaux" by Gabriel Fauré. Horvath was so transfixed he barely noticed that Rev. Salazar had gone to allow the crowd outside, which had grown even larger now, to enter. He took his seat in his usual pew to listen further and wait for the service proper to begin.

If there were any criticism of what followed that perhaps could have been offered, it was that the entrancing power and perfection of the robot music discouraged congregational singing. But that was true in many churches with human choirs and musicians. When the offering was taken, the offering plates were incredibly full - not just fuller than they had been in this church in decades, but fuller than they probably were in any church that size that particular morning.

Rev. Salazar's sermon, when the time came for it, didn't pretend that this was merely business as usual for the congregation. He preached a rousing sermon about the church's need to balance innovation and tradition. When pursuing its mission in the manner that Jesus taught them to, the church had always sought to keep one eye on scripture and tradition, the heritage it inherited from the past, and the other eye on the needs of its present context and the issues people were confronted with in the here and now. The presence of robots symbolized that, the latest technology giving voice to the church's historic music.

The newcomers returned the following week with friends. The word spread. Within a few weeks, the church was packed. The robots offered music that drew from a range of genres, both extremely familiar and long forgotten repertoires, both ancient and brand new music. But whether classic or contemporary, the sheer quality of the rendition meant that few complained in the manner that grumpy churchgoers tend to. No one said the hymns were too old, nor that the drums or guitar were too loud.

The church was soon on its way out of its financial crisis, as well as its membership crisis. The people who came didn't merely attend and put money in the collection plate. They got involved in the ways that it made sense for them to in the

church's various ministries. The church, by any historic definition, was thriving. So it shocked Rev. Salazar when he received a letter that he had been expecting just before his new robotic initiative began, saying that his position was being downgraded, effective immediately, to that of part-time church staff member, and that if he did not accept this change he was welcome to tender his resignation.

Salazar arrived at church on Sunday downcast, perplexed, and more than a little irritated. But he was used to withholding judgment until he had enough information to act on. He expected to find evidence that showed something had changed, that his critics had been proven right and the novelty of what the robots offered had worn off and people had declared their intention to stop coming. But no, the numbers were as strong as ever - indeed, attendance seemed to be up ever so slightly compared to the Sunday before. The music was as phenomenal as it had been. So he sat, waiting for an explanation that he was sure would come. Meanwhile, lay leaders performed their various roles as usual, one providing an announcement, another a Bible reading, yet another saying a prayer. Prayer in particular was one thing that everyone felt particularly strongly needed to remain in the hands of humans. A robot prayer was like a recording of a prayer, even when the programming behind it was such that the

machine was not merely repeating verbatim something someone else had composed.

When they reached the point in the service when it was time for the sermon, Frank Hajduk stood up. He had been scheduled to lead the service that Sunday by providing brief interludes and words addressed to congregants between the contributions of others (whether human or machine), prior to the sermon. But instead of introducing Rev. Salazar as he had been expected to, Hajduk informed the congregation that there was a special surprise in store for them, a guest speaker. Salazar watched as a robot emerged through a side door and ascended to the pulpit. He listened in awe as the robot spoke with a voice that seemed to be mostly a combination of Billy Graham and James Earl Jones. It was a powerful voice, and it delivered a powerful sermon.

Salazar went home shaken, wrote his resignation letter, and emailed it to the presbytery.

When he showed up at the church to meet with the church elders a few days later, however, he had several representatives from the synod with him. The regional body had contacted both the minister and the elders to call for a meeting about what they perceived to be an improper action in the church.

"I sent the presbytery my resignation," Salazar explained. "They wouldn't accept it. It is against denominational policy to leave a church without a minister being arranged."

"We have made an arrangement," said Mr. Antolik coldly.

"Oh, I know. I was most impressed when I heard it preach!" Salazar replied. "And believe you me, I don't disrespect your choice of that machine over me in the pulpit. Let's be honest - how many preachers today could compete with a recording of any one of the best preachers in history, never mind an amalgam of all their voices delivering brand new content? I was convinced almost immediately. That's why I wrote to the denomination right away, tendering my resignation. But as I have already said, they wouldn't accept it."

"Why not?" asked Antolik, clearly both annoyed and suspicious.

"To put it bluntly," said one of the denominational representatives, "your robot is not ordained. Policy requires that the senior minister be credentialed by a seminary of our denomination."

Before any of the elders could interject, Salazar jumped in. "Now, before you say anything, I think I can see a solution that we might all be happy with. Please hear me out. I have no

desire to get rid of the robot - any of the robots, for that matter. There is nothing to prevent a seminary student serving as assistant minister in one of our churches. I will happily take the robot on in the capacity of my assistant pastor...while you send it to seminary."

"What?!" blurted Antolik, his face becoming flushed.

"It was an expensive investment, I'm sure, for the church to purchase this robot. I know - I placed an order for a large number myself not that long ago, as you'll recall. The church will expect to be reimbursed if the robot cannot fulfill the function for which it was purchased. And so rather than lose money selling it used at a loss, why not pay the cost of tuition and send it to seminary? I'm sure that money from talk show interviews and a book deal will help cover the costs."

Mr. Horvath had remained silent up until this point. He asked Salazar, "What do you get out of this arrangement?"

"You mean beyond the survival of the church, and helping to shatter stereotypes about Christianity as simply a thing of the past?" Salazar responded. "Have you already forgotten that I was the one who set the church down this path, at great risk to myself, when all of you were skeptical and resistant? I really do care about the church - about *this* church. But that doesn't

mean I reap no benefits from this arrangement if you agree to it. It genuinely seems to be one in which everyone wins."

Salazar continued. "Let me tell you what's in it for me personally. I have no doubt that, once the robot is ordained, I will be let go. This way, I get four or perhaps five more years in this job, giving me time to find a new one. Heck, if the seminary is willing to allow the robot to enter directly at the Master's level, it might only take a year. I hear these things are quick studies with excellent recall." Salazar grinned impishly. "Even before I leave, I will be known as the minister who trained a robot to replace him. I will be interviewed by the media and my face and my words will be in magazines and on TV. Whenever the time comes that I need to leave, I will land on my feet. What do you say?"

The elders asked for time to consider the matter. The synod representatives made the same request since they had not known what Salazar was scheming until he said it at the meeting. Everyone except Salazar left at least a tiny bit irritated. Salazar, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying himself immensely as he watched everyone else begin to wrestle with what the implications would be of saying either no or yes. And he seemed delighted with their eventual acceptance of his plan, and genuinely to welcome his new assistant in his parish ministry.

The press coverage was sensational as Salazar had predicted. It began immediately at the local level, but soon the church and its robots were making national news. Robots had been introduced in K-12 and university classrooms years earlier, as assistants to teachers and professors, digital TAs that could deliver lectures, answer questions, and so on. Now there would be a robot student, and at a seminary no less. How long, some asked, before all that was left were robots teaching robots? What would be left for humans to do? Others, however, had positive things to say about the embrace of new technology by the church. All the publicity, both favorable and critical, increased attendance on Sunday mornings still further, as Rev. Salazar and many others in the parish were quoted in newspapers and made TV appearances.

Even for the robot to be accepted at a seminary was no small accomplishment in and of itself. Once that had been achieved, and the robot was formally enrolled to enter at the bachelors level and begin classes at the start of the next academic year, the next big hurdle was how it would fare in the classroom and whether it could produce the kinds of assignments and exam answers that would grant it at least a passing grade. Figuring out on what basis Salazar might be given access to the robot's grades and other information about its performance took

everyone into uncharted waters once again. Federal law prohibited an educational institution from disclosing information about grades and academic performance to anyone other than parents and legal guardians, and even then the student must formally grant permission. But what if a student was a robot, had no parent but an owner, and would give consent for disclosure if it was programmed to do so by said owner? Initially, no one knew what to do. After consultation with the seminary's legal advisors, however, it was decided that if Salazar was appointed as the robot's legal guardian, the robot could grant permission for him to be able to obtain information from the seminary about him. Even though Salazar himself would be programming the robot to do this, following the letter of the law should keep them in good stead. This was obviously a matter which, if robot students became something commonplace, would call for new legislation. But they decided that abiding by the laws currently in force was all they could do, and all they needed to do at present.

Having thus been granted permission to keep tabs on how the robot was doing, Salazar was determined to check in with the seminary weekly. Even though there was something in the news almost every day about the robot student written by reporters who visited the seminary, those articles couldn't provide the

kind of information Salazar wanted: classroom participation, grades on assignments, and overall acceptance of the robot by professors and students. By the end of the second week, everything seemed to be going fine, better in fact that he had dared to hope. Once the robot understood that it must raise its hand and be called upon before answering questions, it ceased to completely monopolize classroom discussions as it had initially. The fact that the robot could search the internet quickly on the spot, including the seminary library's database of subscription resources, meant that human students spent their time in the classroom focused primarily on discussion with one another, asking the robot to find things out for them when otherwise they might have turned to their tablets or phones and ended up distracted rather than engaged. The robot needed some way for professors and students to address it and refer to it, and so in the sci-fi tradition of naming robots with a combination of letters and numbers they dubbed it "Rev2B." The first quiz was a breeze, even though the robot was disconnected from the internet while it took it. It could recall perfectly what it had been assigned to learn and had heard in class.

Then, on the Monday of the 4<sup>th</sup> week of classes, Rev. Salazar received a phone call from the dean of the seminary. Rev2B was going fail a class and risked expulsion from the seminary.

Salazar was shocked and didn't know what to say. Images rushed through his mind. Had the robot acted inappropriately in class? Harmed a student? It couldn't just be too many wrong answers on an assignment - they don't expel you for that.

Salazar's throat felt dry as he asked the administrative assistant in the dean's office, who had called him, "What's it done?" When he heard the answer, he asked for a few more details, and then asked if he could make another phone call to the robot's purchaser, after which he would call back to talk with the dean. He hung up the phone, called Mr. Antolik, and said that no matter what he might be doing they needed to meet within the hour to discuss a matter of extreme urgency. When Antolik suggested a coffee shop near his workplace, Salazar said that somewhere more private and discreet was called for under the circumstances. Within 20 minutes Antolik was at the church, and he and Salazar met in a small meeting room with the door closed.

"What software did you install on the robot?" Salazar asked Antolik.

"Standard, run of the mill sermon preparation software," he replied. "It's called something like 'EZPreach.' It came highly recommended. It wasn't cheap, but it would have been foolish to invest in an expensive robot and then be stingy with the

software. Plus, as with the music, I knew the robot's sermons would only draw crowds if they were of the highest quality - not just the voice and style, but the content. Why? What's happened?"

"Rev2B is going to fail its class on New Testament exegesis, and may be liable to fail others," Salazar said glumly. "The dean has indicated that he is considering whether expulsion from the seminary altogether is appropriate under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?" Antolik asked, taken aback.

"The robot has committed plagiarism!" Salazar said with a tone of combined dismay and frustration. "It just submitted its first essay and the professor discovered it."

"You think there's a glitch in the software?" Antolik asked.

"No, I think it is the wrong software for the task," Salazar answered. "I've never found sermon prep software appealing, personally, but I know plenty of ministers who do. And I've tried out a few such packages, downloading a trial version of one or another when some church emergency was keeping me from being as well prepared as far in advance as I like to be. Under such circumstances, I wanted to have a full text

sermon to hand just in case I had no choice but to rely on it. I've tried lots of sermon preparation programs. Some produce text that is barely intelligible, others craft sentences that are downright poetic. But they all have one thing in common. Wanna know what it is?"

Antolik nodded.

"They don't add footnotes. Even ministers who read their sermons off of paper or a tablet screen don't stop to cite sources. At most, we'll say something like, "As John Calvin said..." and then give the quotation or paraphrase. Of course, we have all heard unscrupulous preachers read someone else's sermon they printed off from the internet. What sermon preparation software does is to trawl the internet for content on a particular text or theme, and weave it together into a speech. In a sermon, it doesn't matter to the software if the wording of whole sentences, and the gist of whole paragraphs, are lifted from someone else's work. The words travel through the air a few seconds, wash over the audience, and then are gone. But if you hand in something like that in an academic class, it isn't just going to earn you a low grade because it is too devotional and preachy, inappropriate for the academic setting. If the professor spots the stealing of others' wording and ideas without credit being given to them, you'll at best receive a

failing grade on the assignment, and more likely fail the class. A repeat offender will almost certainly be expelled."

"I thought you said the robot only plagiarized on one assignment," Antolik interjected. "Can't they let it off with a warning?"

"They could, if it were a human student," Salazar said. "When they do that with your typical student, the reasoning is that the student in question may not have known better or made an error of judgment. The hope is that the student will learn from the experience. The problem is that our robot can only learn *content* using the software it has been provided with. It can't learn how to learn differently, to research and write differently. A human student is essentially replacing or upgrading their 'software' when they learn research skills like these. In the robot's case, that's our responsibility."

"So if we replace the robot's software with something suited to academic work, we can be back on track, right?" Antolik suggested. "It may need to retake the course, but if we act quickly we can replace the program before the robot submits any more assignments."

"I've seen essay-writing software," Salazar said in reply. "It has gotten the children in a number of families in the

parish into trouble. Parents have sometimes shared their experiences with me of what they have been told at parent-teacher conferences, and a few of the high school students in the youth group have also shared some stories with me about trouble they have gotten into as a result of using these programs. No one seems to have figured out how to create software that consistently identifies reliable sources of information and cites them accurately, turning them into clear and relevant content that isn't plagiarized. That a robot can't think critically is something we knew in advance. We were expecting it to be a C student - perhaps a B one, what with grade inflation. What no one saw coming was that it might not be capable of crafting essays at all, at least not ones that will pass muster with professors."

Antolik rose to his feet angrily. "You knew!" he said, pointing his finger towards the minister. "I'm sure that you didn't just learn these things about software from parents and students in these past few weeks. You saw this coming, and now you're probably pleased with yourself. You've been hoping for this all along!"

Salazar looked Antolik straight in the eyes. "It in no way serves my interests for this endeavor to fail. I will look bad, worse than anyone else involved. The press have come to view the

robot as my protégé. They will suspect that I programmed or taught it poorly at best, and that perhaps the whole thing has been a scam all along. No matter who purchased or programmed it, the public and the press will blame me. Now, to be completely honest with you, I confess that I have had my doubts about the robot's capacity pretty much since I heard it preach. The content was great - but when you've preached and heard as many sermons as I have, you come to recognize recycled content easily. Not footnoting, though? I confess that that particular issue for the robot's installed software never occurred to me until the seminary called. I assumed the software it was running and any relevant settings would be appropriate to and customized for academic work, even if it was incapable of producing great content."

Antolik's suspicions were not completely eliminated, but his anger subsided somewhat, allowing worry to become his dominant feeling once again. "What do we do now," he asked.

"We think, as quickly as we can," Salazar answered. "We pray. And we ask for help."

"From where?" Antolik asked.

"Everywhere," Salazar replied after an awkwardly long pause, as the germ of an idea began to take shape in his mind.

He picked up his phone and called the seminary dean, asking him whether the seminary would be willing to consider not expelling Rev2B if there was indeed a chance that the robot could learn from its mistake. He reminded the dean that the seminary stood to benefit from its connection with this pioneering effort, and that it could reflect poorly on them if they simply kicked the robot out at the first sign of trouble. Being the locus of a failed experiment would be nothing to be ashamed of if they saw it through to the end, and allowing more time for a creative solution to be found risked nothing that couldn't be resolved at a later point, if they judged then that the robot truly deserved to be expelled.

Once the dean agreed, Salazar ended their conversation and contacted the press.

#

The next morning, the minister was back in a news studio with cameras pointed at him once again, announcing an effort to enlist programmers to craft new software (or a plug-in for an existing package) that would recognize reliable sources and cite them correctly to produce an academic essay appropriate to an undergraduate class at the university level.

"We all know how critical it is to have these skills," Salazar told the anchor, but primarily addressing the audience that was watching and listening from around the country. "Reliance on search engine results and denigration of the value of expertise have significantly damaged public understanding of key issues. So many in our time, looking to confirm their biases and desires, find and latch onto sources that confirm what they already believe and hope to be true. Part of the problem is that, unlike in other areas in which technology has improved our lives, we haven't yet created machines or algorithms that will do a better job of undertaking research and reporting clearly and accurately on the state of our knowledge. I believe we can do better, and need to, urgently. That is the main reason why I am launching an appeal to computer programmers to find a solution."

Salazar told the story of what happened with the robot's software and plagiarism. If the robot was kicked out of seminary for academic dishonesty, sooner or later people would undoubtedly find out what had unfolded, or else they would make up something worse to fill in the place of the unknown truth. It was better to be frank - and to explain the specific impetus for the software engineers and programmers to craft something that did precisely what Rev2B needed to be able to do. Salazar

explained that he didn't have the resources to offer a financial prize for the most effective solution. But he had something that was arguably better: an elevated press platform and extensive reach as a result of the publicity his church's robots had gained thus far. The programmers who cracked this problem would be solving a societal issue and not just one connected with this particular robot. They would boost their own career through the media coverage their achievement would garner.

It only took a matter of days for the solutions to start pouring in. The challenge itself was straightforward enough: create software that could produce an essay that would get a passing grade writing about the same question that the robot had been attempting in its class, using reliable academic sources that were cited correctly. Yet Salazar hadn't anticipated quite how many computer programmers, ranging from teenagers still in high school to well-established professionals at big companies, would respond to his challenge, nor from how many different parts of the world. In the end, he scrapped his plan to either vet the results himself or have the professor at the seminary who had caught the plagiarism do so. There were simply too many entries. So he set up a page on the church website and hosted the essays there, and crowdsourced judging them. He spread the word among seminary professors, students, and other clergy, to

make sure that such perspectives were among those providing an evaluation of submissions. It was crucial that the various kinds of issues that might lead one to fail on the assignment - including but not limited to plagiarism - were caught and flagged, disqualifying those entries.

Soon after word about the competition had begun to spread widely, a major edtech software company contacted Salazar and opened their service to him for the purpose of vetting the submissions. They told him that this would provide them with a good test of their software's ability not only to detect plagiarism, but to distinguish between human-produced and AI-produced work, something that many academics were already concerned about, and which not a few had voiced strong opinions about in response to Salazar's challenge. Of course, it wasn't as though the effort to create software that could undertake and report on research was an entirely new endeavor. Salazar had merely prompted a concentrated and consolidated effort in relation to a problem that numerous programmers and companies already had their sights on. And frankly, Salazar was relieved that the edtech side of things was now directly involved in what he was doing. He didn't want to contribute only to the side of dishonest students in the ongoing software "arms race" between them and professors. With the involvement of these new

collaborators in the effort, Salazar was able to feel ever more excited and exhilarated about the innovation that he was playing a small role in helping to foster.

In the end, there were multiple entries that met the criteria that had been established, which all came in before a successful entry was identified and the end of the competition announced. Salazar felt it was appropriate to showcase all of the leading them in some way, even though there was one particular entry that stood out from all the rest and represented a clear winner.

The winner of the competition was announced at a press conference. Keeping his audience around the world in suspense, Salazar started by surveying some of the losing entries, some of which were amusing. They served to highlight just how challenging a task this was for computer software (and its programmers) to accomplish. One piece of software had cited several porn websites over the course of its theological essay. Another focused not on Jesus of Nazareth but a confusing variety of people named Jesus who were alive today. Yet another cited only academic sources in its footnotes, but its text sounded like it was a campaign ad for Jesus running for office. More than a few had been misled by the widespread presence of both atheist and Christian fundamentalist websites into arguing for

views that were wildly at odds with the consensus of historians and other scholars in relevant fields. Many essays gave no sign of having understood the question. Given that the question was about the relationship between the historical Jesus and the motif of the Messianic secret in the Gospel of Mark, it was only fair to point out that many human seminary students have struggled to understand, never mind answer, a question about that topic. But that was what made this programming competition a challenge, and its successful entries so impressive.

Having referred to successful entries in the plural, Salazar went on to present the programmers whose submissions had crafted acceptable essays, accentuating their achievement and quoting from their essays. However, these were not the winners of the competition, he added. Finally, Salazar offered an introduction to the winner. He shared some of her life story in the manner he was accustomed to when offering a sermon illustration, tugging at the heart strings of those who were now listening with rapt attention in front of screens of various sorts around the world. The winner had created a program that not only managed to identify *really* good sources and cite them correctly, but use them to produce essay content that was not merely lucid but downright eloquent in places. The winner was a woman in her early 20s living in India. Her name was Jayanti

Khan, and she was studying computer science at American College in Madurai.

The essay that Khan had submitted was so impressive that initially Salazar had been suspicious, asking for a second and a third opinion about the essay before taking it seriously. Even then, he arranged for Khan to be flown in from India as part of the assessment process and asked for a demonstration of the software in his presence, with technical advisors present to try to make sure that he was not dealing with a modern essay-writing version of the Mechanical Turk, with a human being hiding behind the mask. However, the software was able to craft an essay in response to an unanticipated question that Salazar posed to it, and did so in a much shorter time frame than any human being could have accomplished it in. Indeed, the writing alone would have taken longer, never mind the research. There was no way that this could be the work of some human being waiting for remote prompting. It was technically impossible for cheating to be involved, for multiple reasons. It was clear that the software was simply that powerful.

The eloquence of the writing, Khan explained, was the result of a machine learning project she had already been working on prior to the competition. The English spoken in India has some distinctive characteristics that can seem odd to

readers and hearers outside the country. After she submitted articles to multiple computer science journals and received rejections from all of them, she had wanted to make sure that it wasn't the language in which she expressed herself that was at fault. So she had trained a program to compare phrasing in her completed drafts of her own articles against the data set of the most cited academic articles in the field of English. The machine had no comprehension of what it was reading, of course. But skillful use of language (unless you are writing poetry that bends and breaks the rules) doesn't involve innovation in grammar or phrasing, but merely a following of best practices when expressing your own ideas. A machine can learn that - and help a human being to learn to do it better, too.

As Salazar provided this brief bio of the winner, he felt it important to mention something else. Khan wasn't a Christian, the minister remarked as he finally invited her to join him in front of the cameras at the press conference. Yet she would be enabling a robot to pursue Christian ministry as a seminary student. She wasn't American, yet she created software that would benefit us and not only herself or her nation. The end result of the project, Salazar said, was a testament to international and inter-religious cooperation, and not just progress in software engineering and artificial intelligence.

#

With the new software installed, Rev2B continued its studies at the seminary. No more plagiarism was detected, and its grades saw an immediate improvement. By its second year of study, public and media interest had largely dissipated. Several congregations had undertaken efforts to incorporate robots into their congregational life. One example that received significant publicity featured robot musicians offering very different genres of music. A megachurch in Chicago had a robot drummer with six arms whose performances were indeed phenomenal. However, no one seemed to be in a hurry to invest in sending another robot to seminary. If they did so, they would simply look like copycats at this stage. If Rev2B ended up failing to graduate, their robot was more than likely to meet the same end as well. There was thus no benefit to doing anything other than waiting to see what the results of this experiment would turn out to be. By this point, there was no way of snatching away the honor that would reward Salazar and his church if things turned out well. And things could still go horribly wrong. That was why everyone was apparently willing to let the risk be shouldered entirely by Salazar and Rev2B.

When the robot was in its final semester at the seminary, and successfully applied for permission to walk and receive its

diploma at the next graduation ceremony, Rev. Salazar sent Jayanti Khan an email to invite her to the graduation. He had made sure to follow her career path so that he would be able to contact her when the time came. She had graduated from college two years earlier, and while she had received countless offers from some of the biggest software companies in the world, she had chosen to start her own business instead, and did so even while she was still a student. The company seemed to be doing impressively well, at least as far as he could tell as an outsider to that industry. It was only twenty minutes after he sent the email that his phone rang, displaying a longer than usual number indicating the call came from somewhere overseas. Salazar answered it quickly.

"Hello?"

"Rev. Salazar? This is Jayanti calling you from India. I was so delighted to receive your invitation to Rev2B's graduation and would love to attend. I had been hoping to hear from you once the graduation was confirmed." Khan paused before continuing. "I have a proposition for you, and want to say before I go any further that if you agree, I intend to show my appreciation by covering all of Rev2B's tuition and fees."

"That's very kind of you to offer," Salazar replied. "But it really isn't necessary. The robot's media appearances and my own book deal have already taken care of those expenses."

"Oh, so sorry for not being clear," Khan replied. "I meant *future* tuition."

Salazar paused for a moment before asking, "What future tuition?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I would like to know if you are open to Rev2B pursuing a doctorate." Khan went on to explain that, with the success of her software that could synthesize existing information in the way one expects in an undergraduate assignment, the next big challenge was whether an AI could do original cutting-edge research. She and her employees had been working on this problem and felt they were making significant progress. But the real test of success this time would be whether a machine-written research article could pass peer review and be accepted by a major journal. As of this moment, no robot other than Rev2B had a legitimate institutional affiliation and an academic supervisor that would allow this to be pursued in a way that could be documented and studied.

Salazar wasn't sure what the ramifications of pursuing this might be. But he knew that Khan had turned their robot student

in danger of expulsion into one that made the dean's list each academic year. If he tried, he could probably think of some reasons that he could legitimately refuse, excuses he might offer that might have some validity. But he knew immediately that he did not want to refuse. "How can I refuse, after everything your software has done for us?" Salazar asked, pausing for only a second before continuing. "But if you don't mind, I have long wanted to ask you something. I know you're not a Christian. If the robot goes on to graduate school, it will presumably be in theology or something related to that. Goodness, it would probably be simpler if it could do work in chemistry, wouldn't it? Research in the natural sciences, or perhaps mathematics, would seem more up a robot's alley. But I suspect that you're actually more interested in it trying to write a thesis in the humanities - that's the real challenge for programmers now, isn't it? But anyway, as I started to say, with you not being a Christian, I have long wondered how you feel about your software turning a robot into a Presbyterian minister."

There was a long enough pause that Salazar began to worry that either they had been cut off, or that he might have offended her. But when Khan spoke, she sounded as though she

were speaking from a source of personal conviction, and with some enthusiasm for the topic.

"My father is a Muslim, and my mother is Hindu. They brought me up to respect all beliefs, and in both of their traditions Jesus is a respected figure. On a professional level, I would have been happy if my path to success had come from just about anywhere. But on a personal one, I am so happy for the way this all came together. You said it yourself at the press conference where you announced that I had won, although at that point you hadn't asked me about my perspective on the matter. This project thus far, and what I am proposing that will carry it further, doesn't just illustrate the possibility of international and interfaith cooperation. It illustrates the connections between computer science and the humanities, between faith and reason. I'm not even thinking of your religious faith when I say that. Every step of the way, as I have heard the story told, you have stepped out into the unknown in a way that didn't expect miracles, but did depend on diverse others rising to the challenge of the situation with hope, trust, willingness to risk, and goodwill. You didn't act irrationally, but you also dared to set out in uncharted directions over and over again. That's what I want to see continue and enhanced in the next stage of things. What do you say?"

Salazar agreed, and after chatting some more, they ended their conversation. As Salazar set his phone down, he scanned the books that filled the shelves around his office walls, until his eyes alighted on a volume on inter-religious dialog and interfaith cooperation. He got up, pulled it from the shelf, and turned to the index. As he suspected, there was no entry on robots, none on computers, not even one on technology. They were indeed in uncharted territory - and that was not just because the book was now more than a decade old. For all our penchant for innovation and creativity, for progress, human beings are still a highly risk-averse species.

Salazar sat down in a different chair on the other side of the office, leaned back, and looked out the window at the barren branches of the old oak tree nearby. They stood as though poised, waiting for a signal to indicate that these last few weeks of early spring chilliness had at long last passed, and now they can start to bud. People have argued that technology divides people and that it brings people together, Salazar mused silently. People have had the same arguments about religion. The answer was plainer to him now than it had ever been before. Technology and religion don't do either one of those things - not on their own, at any rate. A phone doesn't connect or divide people while lying neglected on a desk. But it can do either,

depending on how it is used. The same is true of robots, and religion, and just about anything else for that matter. But when we don't want to change our habits as a society, and we find ourselves disconnected from or in conflict with one another, we blame our tools for shortcomings that reside within ourselves.

#

By the time that the first robot in history walked across the stage of the seminary's auditorium, it had already been accepted into the DMin program. Its proposed thesis topic was to research the history and prospects for the future of the congregation where it had been serving as assistant minister for the past four years. The foundation of the research project would utilize significant amounts of sociological as well as historical data, allowing the robot to draw on its computational strengths to crunch numbers and trawl enormous swaths of data that no human being could ever hope to get a handle on. Upon that foundation, the robot would then face the challenge of engaging in a more humanistic undertaking. Could it not only detect neglected patterns in this tiny slice of religious history, but even interpret them in a manner that would allow it to make a recommendation about what the congregation ought to do in the future?

By the end of the first year, the robot had indeed identified correlations that no one had previously been fully aware of. Patterns in the tiniest fluctuations in Sunday morning attendance that consistently presaged larger shifts soon to follow. Correlations between church membership numbers, how much people gave to the church, and demographic shifts in the surrounding neighborhood, city, and nation. The impact of the arrival of a new minister, the addition of staff members such as ministerial assistants, and other kinds of events, both positive and negative, in the life of the church. These data points about the congregation were correlated with one another, and then the robot brought in data about thousands of other congregations for comparison. As he read drafts of the first few chapters of the robot's thesis, setting forth the methodology and the key data, Rev. Salazar felt like he was already learning so much about a congregation whose history he thought he knew well, that he had studied in as much detail as he could.

"As much as was humanly possible," he thought to himself. "Thank God (he meant that literally) for bringing a non-human perspective to bear on this." When he saw the connection that emerged between adding ministry staff and subsequent church conflict, Salazar wondered whether the robot might not recommend its own termination from its current position. But what Rev2B

recommended in the end, when it became apparent in drafts of the conclusion of the thesis, took everyone by surprise. The biggest periods of genuine flourishing in the congregation's history had to be measured not only in terms of membership and giving, but also in terms of internal harmony and community outreach. The robot had recognized that "healthy" attendance numbers and finances sometimes hid other maladies in the life of the congregation. Those times when the church was truly thriving were connected not merely with high attendance and giving, but also, surprisingly enough, with economic downturns in the nation and the city. And they were times when the church started new ministries or enhanced existing activities that serve the people in the surrounding neighborhood. Recent economic data made the robot 94% confident that a similar challenge/opportunity was approaching within the next year. And the church's current lack of outreach into its immediate surroundings suggested that this time they were likely to experience crisis rather than renewal, unless changes were made quickly to prepare for what was coming.

All of that would have been impressive enough. But the recommendation the robot made left Salazar feeling rather foolish. It was the feeling of someone who had purchased an expensive tool for use in one specific brief project, and only later found that they could have been using it daily to address

other longstanding problems they struggled with. For that was precisely what he and his church had done. So it was that, even before the thesis was submitted, the church had begun acting on the draft recommendation. On weekdays, which the robots had previously spent locked safely in a storage room awaiting their next Sunday performance, the church now sent their army of robot choristers out into the community, to check on the elderly and infirm, deliver food to the hungry, and teach English to members of a community of refugees. They cleaned up abandoned lots littered with trash, repaired dilapidated houses, and even washed a few cars. It turned out the robots were also capable of preparing a darn good breakfast for poor community members in the church hall on Saturday mornings. They did all these things the way they sang and played the organ: skillfully and masterfully. The human members of the church joined in these activities as well. But as a result of the robot work force shouldering so much of that responsibility, the human members of the church were able to focus primarily on fellowship, building friendships, performing counseling, and other things that still required a human touch.

When Rev2B graduated, Jayanti Khan was invited to attend once again. This time, however, it was to be a guest speaker at commencement and receive an honorary degree. And when Rev2B was

ordained, an alternative venue to the church sanctuary had to be used. The church's membership and regular attendance had swelled by so much in recent years, that there was no way the many additional invited guests would be able to fit, to say nothing of the reporters who had already indicated their plans to attend. They therefore utilized a large auditorium in the denomination's regional headquarters for the event. Even so, it was packed.

In the ceremony, after the usual laying on of hands, the robot was able to preach an impressive sermon that incorporated insights from its doctoral research, which had by this point been accepted for publication and would appear within the upcoming year as a book. But of course, it only did these things because it had been instructed to. Many in attendance seemed to have allowed themselves to forget that the machine was an impressive piece of technology but did not have any kind of self-awareness. The robot had been taught to respond with polite appreciation to those who congratulated it. Some even asked the robot whether it had a sense of pride about its achievements, or was happy about the impact of its research on the community or the congregation. The way it answered made it clear that such sentiments as pride or happiness were completely alien to this machine. Salazar was surprised that so many of the people in

attendance seemed not to realize that they were treating the machine as though it were human.

All parties involved judged this entire experiment to be a resounding success, with a very satisfactory outcome. Even so, the church and the denomination went through with what had been proposed years earlier, soon after all of this began. Even though it was years after the fact, they accepted Rev. Salazar's previously-tendered resignation and elevated his robot assistant into his position to serve as his replacement. Being ordained, they decided to simply call it "Rev" from then on.

Salazar would have been fine with all this even if there had not been hundreds of churches around the country that had written to the denomination indicating a desire to call him to be their minister should the opportunity ever arise. He was something of a celebrity, after all. He had a book deal with a publisher to tell his story. He would be able to take care of himself and his family. He could take an appropriate pride in what he had accomplished in the church. It is the place of ministers to stay for a while and serve, to be viewed as indispensable while they are there and yet eventually be forgotten. He knew one day his name would simply be another on the plaque on the church wall listing past ministers. Such things are ignored by most who pass them, and the names are

largely unfamiliar even to those who briefly stop to look. Likewise, when future textbooks about robotics were written, "Rev" would undoubtedly get a mention, while Salazar's name might not even be deemed worthy of a footnote. Having managed to remain optimistic and even cheerful in the midst of radical innovation and pioneering efforts that left everyone around him deeply unsettled, now at the end he couldn't shake a certain gloominess as he prepared to depart.

Something he had seen in the congregation in recent years also weighed on his mind. He had dismissed it previously as silly naïveté, something that one might shake their head at condescendingly but which would cause no harm. Now he was not so sure. People empathize with machines. They come to treat them like people, as though they have the same sort of inner lives and sentiments that human beings do. If we continue on that course as a species, eventually we may find that some begin to be willing to choose a machine over a person in at least some circumstances in which both were at risk of harm or death. "Death!" He caught himself. Even he could apparently not avoid thinking about machines in human terms, despite his close association with a robot over the course of many years, which had given him a profound understanding of their remarkable capabilities, but also their limitations. Perhaps it was no

surprise that others did so as well. Yet after all the challenges they had faced, he would have expected more people to have a better understanding of what a robot could and could not do, of what a robot was and what it was not.

It is a failure to empathize with other human beings that has driven so much conflict in the world, Salazar mused as he took books from the shelves in his old church office and placed them in boxes. Whether the divisions were along political, religious, or any other lines, it had been a failure to recognize others as fully human that was really at the heart of the problem. Won't it be ironic, he thought, if in the end it is our excessive empathy - towards robots instead of and in place of human beings - and our humanizing of things that aren't human, that proves to be humanity's undoing?

Then he caught himself, rebuked himself for these gloomy thoughts. The path had not been smooth, but along the way he had seen so many examples of genuine cooperation. Rather than dwelling on how he would one day be forgotten, he now turned his thoughts instead to how every famous person depended on countless others whose names we do not remember, without whom they could not have accomplished what they did. Being remembered might be nice, but making a positive difference should be what really matters.

That will make a nice sermon, Salazar thought as he pulled the church office door behind him for what might be the last time, his spirits lifted somewhat. Whatever sense there is in which we taught a robot something, he realized, this creation of ours seems to have taught us even more.