

Transcript of the Wycliffe Global Alliance's interview with James Poulter, 10 June 2025.

Jim Killam: What would be the best way for us to describe you and what you do? I mean, I've seen your bio and everything, but what's a quick way to describe why we're talking?

James Poulter: I think I've been struggling with definitions myself recently, but I would broadly say that I'm a consultant. I spend time helping businesses and ministries and organizations of all types really wrestle with the challenge of artificial intelligence and how it can reshape the way that they do the work and also what it means to work. I'm deeply concerned about ethics and how do we use this technology responsibly to enable human flourishing whilst also getting all of the administrative, technical benefit out of these tools that are emerging¹. So that's kind of where I come from and historically I've spent a lot of time doing that in various technology revolutions previously in the app space and digital space in social media and then kind of going back to kind of broadcast and the early days of things like podcasting. So those are kind of like, that's the tools of duty that I've done, so to speak.

JK: Yeah. So, fair to say that you're comfortable around disruption and figuring out what it all means, then?

JP: That's what I've always tried to do is try and kind of make sense for people of all of the technical stuff that's out there. What does it really mean for you as a person walking about the planet and how does it affect what you're going to do tomorrow? You know, not the stuff you're going to do 10 years from now. None of us can truly know what that looks like, but how's it going to change tomorrow, next week, next month, maybe? Yeah. Kind of next year, but operate in the real time, so to speak.

JK: Well, I think what we'd like to do with this is a kind of a minimally technical overview of AI. A lot of our audience is organisational leaders around the world, and they're certainly aware of AI and they're probably using it in some minimal way. But as I listened to the Missional AI Summit and other things I've read lately, this is being portrayed as a world-changing, global shift. And as I was working on stories from the Missional AI summit, I was telling some friends what I was learning about this and how this is how big this is going to be. And several of them just told me 'You're getting obsessed with this. Enough already.' And so there is still that element, too, of people really not thinking much about this yet or aware and particularly Christians who are not immersed in this world. What would you tell them about the next couple of years and how their lives might change?

JK: I would say that everything that we do day-to-day, week-to-week is up for grabs when it comes to AI, up for disruption. That doesn't necessarily mean that everything looks different because actually the pace of change for most of life is a lot slower. But if you think about all the things that you do every day that involve a computer in some way or technology has an influence

on, I think that's all about to change quite significantly in the next couple of years. Even at the most fundamental level of what does it mean to kind of use the devices that we have? What it means, you know, kind of play in our lives? Whether that's from getting in your car and grabbing the steering wheel now to getting in the car and telling it where to go in the very future. Or sitting in front of a computer and trying to, you know, purchase laundry detergent for next Saturday's shop, rather than browsing the Walmart website and adding something to your cart, it's probably about talking to the Walmart AI and it going and doing that for you. Or more likely that it's already done it for you in the background. It just shows up on time and on time, with the latest price, with the best discount available, and also three other things that you didn't know you needed, but they've worked out for you⁴. And at work, I think it looks like us, you know, spending a lot more time talking with one another with an AI in the room listening and then talking with that AI to help us make the decisions of the day rather than us having to do an awful lot of data processing of our own and manipulation of information. And then, in our social lives and at home, and in church, I think it means that we have a lot more time to go deeper on some of those things, but also where there'll be real challenges to what relationship looks like in the 2020s, well, certainly in the 2030s, because some of your friends are going to have AI friends and some of your friends are going to try and marry AI friends perhaps and your kids are probably going to have AI tutors that they talk to probably more regularly than the teacher teaches their class. And so that's going to shift our behavior and our relationships and what it means to be in relationship in community with one another in ways that I don't think we can yet fully see because we also don't know how much we'll resist it and how much boundary we'll put up or how openly people will embrace this. So I think for certain sectors of society things are going to get really weird really quick and then we're going to spend a long time working it out after them.

JK: Yeah, the 'really quick' idea is another I was going to ask you about. We've obviously lived through periods of great change, but more incremental maybe than what this looks like. Do you think people are realizing how fast this is moving?

JP: No, I don't think they are. It's not that people aren't telling them. You know, if you go to any of the major newspapers every day and read the predictions, but actually the reality is that most people don't go to the newspapers every day. And the reality is that most people do hear the predictions and go, 'No, no, that's science fiction. That's never going to happen. My job's never going to, my job's safe. My job's never going to get affected.' And I just think that they're not paying as much attention as they probably should. Because that was what people said about social media when that arrived, right? ... If I had told you that you, the average under-25-year-old was going to spend more than six hours a day scrolling through pictures of their friends on Instagram, in 2008 we were like, 'You're crazy. We don't have broadband. That would cost a fortune. My data plan would never be able to accommodate it.' And also like, 'Who's going to take all these pictures? What are they taking along? None of my friends are that interesting. They're not doing stuff.' And yet here we are.

JP: So I think we massively underpredict the change that's going to happen in the next two to four years. And we also massively overpredict our abilities to manage that change. And that's where we sit at the minute, in between these two kind of realities. This technology is already actually here.

JK: Yeah.

JP: Most of the technology that's going to transform the way we work in the next decade doesn't require super intelligence. It doesn't even require artificial and general intelligence. It's kind of already here. It just isn't adopted at scale by most people, by most parts of the economy. So even if it got no smarter, but all of us used it to its fullest potential, we'd see radical change. But of course, it's not stopping at where we are now. I think all predictions are up and to the right in terms of both the compute, the capability, the speed and the intelligence if you want to use that word—although it's probably not the right word, actually, as these models don't really know anything at all but they are able to do something that looks similar to what we ascribe to each other as intelligent.

JK: As you would be thinking of ministry leaders, again that's a lot of our audience. What advice would you have for them about what they should be doing? Their lives are full with other responsibilities, but in terms of learning about and engaging with AI, any advice on what they ought to be thinking about?

JP: Well, so I would challenge the question which is are ministry leaders' lives full of responsibilities or are they full of the burden of administration of a few responsibilities?

I think most leaders now—and I don't just mean this of churches, but I mean it of small businesses—people leading nonprofits, most of them got into what they're doing to do a very specific set of things that they were passionate about. And the reality of leading in any of those contexts is you spend 90 percent of your time doing the administration of that 10 percent of things that you're most excited about.

JK: Yeah.

JP: Whether that's balancing a budget, doing a building renovation project, upgrading a manse (minister's house), ordering new chairs, making sure that there's enough blue kitchen roll in the kitchen for Sunday morning, you know, like these are the stuff that actually fills the days of most people leading in ministry or in nonprofit world and also in the business space. And very few parts actually of the week I can tell you and you most of the pastor, lead pastors, teaching pastors I know even with big teams spend still significantly less time every week planning their sermon than they wish they did.

And why is that? Well, because they're taken up with what I call the administration. It's the burden of the admin. And I think that's the opportunity here: If AI could give you 20 percent of

your week back, what would you do with it? That's the real question. What would it do if it gave you 50 percent of your week back? I know things I would do that I know are important, but they're never important enough that I would get to them because the burden of the urgent often gets in the way. And that's the potential, I think, is that if all of these leaders that listen or read this would just take up the mantle of paying as much attention to learning this as they've learned how to finesse a PowerPoint slide or navigate their way through their donor fundraising platform, they would find that they have a lot more time to do those things that they deem to be actually the important. I think that's the real opportunity. And at the same time there are some risks that we can probably talk about as well. But I think there's huge opportunism.

JK: Have you have you seen a hesitancy to do that? Maybe there's a learning curve they're afraid of, or I don't know what that would be, but what do you think is the hesitancy?

JP: So, I think we see from some of the research we've done with our partners at Gloo and others that particularly for those that are leading ministries, they operate at two ends of the spectrum. We've got some super users already, people who are fully baked in using the stuff all the time, but that's probably 10 to 15 percent at one end of the spectrum. At the other, there's a kind of conscientious objector group which are basically like "I think this is evil. There's 666 in the code. I'm not touching this with a barge pole." And that they are kind of mostly convinced on ethical grounds that or theological grounds that it's just wrong. The real opportunity, I think, is the group in the middle, which is that for most people there are a few things that you do every day, every week, every month or every quarter that take up radically more time than you wish you had to do them. And you have to do them regularly, and that I think is the promise of a lot of this generative automation and agentive AI capability is to take the burden of the thing that is easy to predict, systematized, process driven, non-creative and take that lift for you. So you can focus on the things that are the opposites to that, that are the messy things, you know, the things of people, the things of thinking and spirituality. These are the things that we need our people engaged in much more often than modern life allows them to be.

JK: Kind of a broad question here, but maybe we can zero in on a couple of things. What do you think AI is going to mean for Bible translation in the next, say, five years?

JP: Well, I'm really encouraged by the work that the ETEN network is doing and the Bible labs and this mission to try and kind of get the last few languages across the precipice. The real question is what do, those who are doing that work, because I think that is a work that has an end date where that has been accomplished in some way and I think that end date is coming closer—much, much closer with AI.

Because it seems like a problem that should be able to be solved. The real question is, what do those translators do after that? And really I think that's the thing that they should be preparing for. We may see some computational leaps in the next 24 to 36 months that mean that mission of being in every tribe and every nation is actually accomplished certainly by 2030, certainly the early 2030s. That's not that long away. And I think for a lot of these organisations, they need to be thinking radically about how do they begin to not think just about translation but about

exposition, about explanation, about cultural context and about the job of evangelism and discipleship.

That's the stuff that those ministries will need to focus on in the years to come as well as also maintaining cultural relevance of these different texts. Cultural understanding, cultural fluency, I think, is the great skill that humans possess that an AI cannot replicate—which is to be able to be live and in the moment and understanding the world as it kind of unveils itself to us in all of the different pockets and languages and ways that it emanates. And we know that AI isn't everywhere all the time because the reality is that the world is a very diverse place. And I think those that work in translation probably know this more than most—that there are groups and people and places in the world that these models are not reaching that they don't represent that their knowledge is not captured by. And I think they've got a huge opportunity to serve those communities by being the ears, the eyes and the words of those people in those places and then bringing those to the technology platforms to help make sure that we have what I call real DEI—and that DEI is digital equity and inclusion—that we actually need all people to have access to all of the intelligence of the world, otherwise no one is fairly being treated. And so that's I think the real opportunity for translators, not to translate the words but translate the cultures of these places so that the whole world can benefit from their learning and experience of what it means to be people walking about the planet, you know? That's the real opportunity for a translator in this time. It's not necessarily about the nuance of linguistics or hermeneutics. It's about interpreting culture. For me, that's the thing I get excited about.

JK: It's interesting, too, that that's a very different skill set than what these ministry organisations have needed over the years. Or there's been some need for that, but largely it's been more about literally translating text and that sort of thing. What kind of skill sets do you think specifically Bible translation organisations are going to need in the next few years that maybe they aren't very flush in right now?

JP: Well, I mean, we still need linguists absolutely, because these models are trained on massive amounts of data, and that data is language and language is nuanced and is varied. And so whilst many of them have been focused on the translation of a very specific set of text, there's a whole lot of other text in the world that needs to be brought in and also generated out. And so I think there's going to be a huge opportunity in the future for linguists to be the ones who are fact-checking and culture-checking the output of these models as they become the thing that actually does the literal transformation from one language to another. We also need to make sure that these AIs produce reliable trusted AI for human flourishing, and that's the work that I've been doing with the team at Gloo, thinking about, how do we build some models that can actually do this? But of course, those models predominantly at the moment are helping cater to the Western English world maybe a little bit of the Latin Spanish world. But as we know, there are hundreds of languages, thousands of languages around the world that need to be looked after. So, I think those linguists will still have a massive role to play, but they should be less concerned about the translation from one language to another and more about the transcription perhaps of what these models know.

JK: Yeah. With the building of these massive Christian LMs, do you see that being one centralized source eventually or do you think there's going to be a lot of these that somehow work together?

JP: I think there will be lots of them ... and I think there should be lots of them, because I think we need diversity of thought and I don't think we want a world where all of that knowledge is controlled by one single player. I think it's good and healthy to have an ecosystem approach to this, and we would encourage those that are working with the models to work with them responsibly, but also to challenge those that are producing them to make sure that we are getting a variety of thought. And simply because there's just so much work to do and so much opportunity, particularly when you think outside of just text-to-text—being able to produce text—but things like being able to produce video, being able to produce audio content out of these things, and also being able to produce assistance out of them as well. Things that you can talk to and that talk back. We are going to need a variety of different models for different use cases that have different knowledge, accuracy and domain, and understanding. So I think we want an ecosystem and we want a diverse one but also one that is aligned with human flourishing and values that we can rely upon for trusted outputs, particularly when it comes to theological topics.

JK: I was reading the AI 2027 thing that you had fed into Claude, which pretty fascinating. It that seemed to make a case that there might be kind of a central huge Christian LM that addresses all of this. But maybe that's biased.

JP: Well, yeah, maybe that's a little bit biased. I think some of that bias probably comes from the original paper that I helped use to kind of form that. Because that is also kind of the view of a lot of the AI science literature, that once you kind of reach super intelligence, you don't really need more than one of them. By definition, it's able to do everything. So, why would you need a second one? But, of course, we know that we actually do often need competition in these markets. We're not big fans of monopoly particularly, and also we will need ones that work across international jurisdictions by different governance structures and are also protected by different rights. So I don't think we end up with one kind of global situation. Equally, I don't think we want a Tower of Babel Take 2 situation, either. So I think we do want trusted, pioneering people that are doing this work in different places around the world for different languages and people groups, who are really deeply empathetic to the needs of those communities and culturally fluent in what's appropriate for them. Otherwise, people will be limited because they won't be able to understand the nuances of the text and understand the nuances of the situations that people are trying to seek support in. So I think we need variety for sure.

JK: So I'm hearing you say that certainly Bible translators are not going to be out of work anytime soon, anything like that. And we are definitely in the Alliance shifting to a mindset of engagement rather than simply starting new projects because as you said, in five to 10 years, we're really going to be at the end of that road. But then there are lots of other roads that continue.

The Alliance does a Global Gathering every four years. We just did one last November in Johannesburg. And we were all kind of thinking the same thing, that this is going to look radically different four years from now. We had people speaking lots of different languages. We had people sitting in interpretation booths and then speaking to people with headphones on around tables. Can you give me a scenario of what a gathering like that could look like in four years?

JP: Yeah. Wow. I mean, what could it look like? I think it looks like us no longer being limited by the languages that people speak in the room. I think it probably looks like most of us being able to have a near real-time fluent conversation with one another out loud or digitally in that space. I think it probably means that we have speakers from places around the world that were previously unavailable to us. Not because they didn't exist and not because they didn't know about our events, but because we didn't know about them. Because the language barrier is about to be unlocked in such a massive way. You know, you think about it at a moment like for many of the big YouTube creators right now, they can go viral in another country right now if they were to just translate their content into another language, because there is a dearth of people doing that work in those markets. But there are also influencers who are only famous in Ukrainian or only famous in German, and they're about to have an opportunity to be global in their notoriety and their knowledge is unlocked, because they're no longer constricted by the language of their mother tongue. So, I think we're going to see that.

And I also think the digital presence itself is going to change as well. I was at an event with CV ([computer vision](#)) last year in Athens and we had a virtual presenter on stage who was essentially in a holographic box on the stage presenting. And it was incredible. But we're also seeing from the work we do with them that they are producing digital avatars of people that don't exist because they need to be able to reach into people groups where it would be dangerous for someone to go on camera and tell their story. And so we can create facsimiles of these people through avatars. And so I think we will have avatar presenters that maybe are facsimiles of real people, but it would be dangerous for them to speak from their cultural context into ours. And so you might be somewhere in Rajasthan where you might be being oppressed and you could be speaking on a stage in Dallas virtually with a different face and with a different voice but still being the author. In real time, in a presence that feels like you're in the room. I think that all of these things become possible very, very soon. I think that's exciting.

JK: It's mind-boggling, isn't it? When you realize again how fast this is all moving. I was very interested in the AI 2027 paper and interested in the end-of-humanity angle to that. I don't know that a lot of people share that take, but I do see a lot of AI researchers and experts being interviewed and saying this is really dangerous and this could be end-of-days kind of thing. What's your take on those sorts of predictions and scenarios?

JP: I mean, I always think that it's not a zero chance, in some respects. We've done some pretty terrible things with technology in the past that have brought us pretty close to the brink and then

we walked back from them. I also think that as that threat grows—which inevitably may still continue to grow from where we are today but doesn’t necessarily have to result in that eventuality—I think, generally speaking, that populations tend to rise up and try and govern and manage it in a way that we have done with—the usual analogy is nuclear weapons, or you could say the internet in more general sense. Or, you know, kind of governing other uses of technology that interfere with our private lives, things like gene editing and other technologies that kind of challenge some of our kind of fundamental understandings of human ethics. But it doesn’t mean that we can have a 100-percent track record of getting it right, either. And so therefore, of course there are potentials there. I think we would be either lazy or naive to assume that there isn’t a 100 percent chance of this always going kind of right (badly).

At the same time, I think that we believe in a better narrative than that. I think this is why we need these types of voices in this debate, because I don’t think that’s what we’re expecting to happen. My reading of the gospels and Revelation don’t give me the idea that that’s where we’re ending up. But it’s worth being aware that there’s a lot of damage that could be done if left unchecked, way before you get anywhere near total human wipeout and annihilation. There’s a lot of harm that could still be done, so we have to be cautious about these things. We have to be careful.

And the thing I would always advocate for, and have been writing about a lot recently, is that I think we need to do a much better job at educating the public around those risks. Not the existential ones, not even about sustainability or model control or anything of that nature, but just the personal risks. The same way that we didn’t educate people about the personal risk of social media a decade ago and we’ve come to pay the price for. I think the work that Jonathan Haidt and other scholars in that space who are doing a lot of work now around smartphones and the effect that they have in social media, the effect on young people in particular, we need to be putting out those same kinds of public health warnings and education now to avoid those existentials that we couldn’t have otherwise predicted. And we should learn our lesson. That’s my biggest concern, that we don’t learn those lessons that there’s a far higher chance of AI having a major disruptive effect on society that doesn’t involve kind of total wipeout, but is just as disruptive if we don’t manage it well.

JK: One thing I see missing from a lot of those dire predictions would be a spiritual angle to all of this and maybe the role of the church the global small “c” church. It was interesting that you took that report and fed it into Claude and created a faith scenario. How did you think it did, in terms of what you’re expecting? Did something surprise you about what it churned back out?

JP: I don’t think I was surprised at its ability to do the task, but what it produced—surprised is probably the wrong word. I think it was interesting because it confirmed a lot of my own thoughts and predictions about where we might go with this stuff. It obviously had a certain bias to it in the sense that it was kind of taking the original AI 2027 paper as a leap-off point. And I wouldn’t say that portrays a particularly positive view of the way the world is going to go. I do think that there are parts of it and I’m trying to recall which aspects of it now that were maybe

more challenging than others. Things about kind of digital church attendance and stuff like that I think has been something that we've been concerned about for some time. I heard a couple of weeks ago on the [Hard Fork podcast](#), I think it was from New York Times. Demis Hassabis, who's the CEO of Google Deep Mind, that was the Deep Brain team. ... He was asked by Casey Newton from platform whether or not he thought that AI was going to give rise to some spiritual awakening. And Demis' view was that yes, that there probably would be a pursuit of the transcendental far more than ever before because this technology challenges us to think about things in that way that other technologies haven't done previously. Which I thought was interesting. I think his exact words were that we need as many theologians as technologists thinking about this stuff.

So yes, in some respects I'm not surprised because I think this is exactly what we've come to expect of technology that is as pervasive as AI is—that it will challenge an awful lot of our preconceptions about kind of how normal things are.

JK: Maybe as a wrap-up, I'll ask you a variation of a question I asked you before. What should the church be doing right now that it isn't?

JP: I think one of the things that we should be doing is not being afraid. We should be embracing as much of this stuff to make us as effective as possible in the pursuit of our mission, whilst at the same time protecting human flourishing. And so that means drawing up some red lines, being clear about what those are and educating people on how to stay within those boundaries and guidelines in the same way that we would do with anything else in life, because we believe that we're supposed to stand for a better narrative. That's what I think we should be doing. And on a practical point, that means yes, embracing the tools and making life easier for leaders and congregations and team members and everything else. And at the same time, also educating our communities on the potential ways that this technology is going to shape the way that they work, the way that they live, the way that they educate one another because that is going to change a lot and we don't want to be on the back foot.

JK: Well, I think this is a helpful conversation to move some of our folks in that direction. So, much appreciated, James.

JP: Glad to have it, Jim, thanks.

JK: This is fascinating. I appreciate what you're doing and some of the information you're putting out. I've been watching a lot of it and reading a lot of it. You just feel overwhelmed sometimes with how much there is to learn.

JP: Yeah, I feel that, too. And you know, there is a weight that comes with this topic because it's moving so fast and I feel a burden to kind of stay on top of it. But hopefully if all of us begin to kind of do a little bit more kind of leaning in and learning about it that everything gets easier.

#