



November 3, 2025

Church & Society raises concern over proposed Commonwealth data centers

This letter, from the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church's Board of Church and Society addresses a current issue of concern about the growth of new Data Centers in Goochland, Henrico and Hanover counties, Virginia.

Data centers, especially those referred to as "hyperscale AI" data centers, consume and impact vast quantities of land, water and air. Their intensive systems emit diesel exhaust, particulate matter, low frequency sound waves, noise, water pollution and overtax the electric grid, while utility costs are often doubled as residents in their communities pay for infrastructure demands. The data epidemic is creating unsustainable conditions, as defined above, and is becoming a core challenge in the modern digital age we find ourselves trying to navigate.

The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, lend written support to the Goochland Residents Alliance and its advocacy work. The Goochland Residents Alliance seeks to equip residents in Goochland, Henrico and Hanover Counties in Virginia which face Data Center Development with the knowledge and strategies necessary to advocate for their way of life and land use.

West Creek in Goochland next to Short Pump, and Hanover -- just across the Henrico line, are the two Data Center development sites. These two data center farms pose hazards to human health and the environment.

This is a call for the Data Center Industry to adhere to standards that protect our fragile environment, social equity and economic conditions; and to foster balanced, sustainable growth, in which residents can live in wholeness and health. The Residents' Alliance calls us to stand witness as transnational corporations, owned by a powerful, wealthy minority, impose digital industries on residents of communities at an unsustainable pace.

The current residential and business communities have had no or little voice in data center planning or development. While federal, state and local governments are charged with the responsibility of community health, safety and welfare, it is evident that policies are not yet in place, and local ordinances do not yet have the strength or specificity to provide the protections that are needed. Federal and state governments are mostly mute, and localities are vulnerable to the financial and sometimes empty promises of data centers.

The United Methodist Social Principles, as adopted by the General Conference 2024, are the guiding principles in which we act on our Biblical faith in contemporary society. They align with community principles of creation, economic and political justice.

"The Community of All Creation"

¶160 (p 9-10) states: *We affirm that all creation belongs to God and is a manifestation of God's goodness and providential care. Human beings, nonhuman animals, plants, and other sentient and non-sentient beings participate in the community of creation, and their flourishing depends on*

*the care of all God's creation. **Rather than treating creation as if it were placed here solely for humanity's use and consumption, we are called to practice responsible stewardship and to live in right relationship with the Creator and with the whole of God's creation** (Gen. 1:26–31; Matt. 6:26–30; Rom. 8:22–24). We are also called to honor the role of every part of creation in healing the whole; thus we praise God with the whole of creation (Ps.*

148) and recognize that we are part of complex ecosystems, all valued by God. We affirm our sacred calling to be responsible stewards and to lovingly tend all that God has wrought. We recognize the inherent worth of God's creation, celebrate earth's abundance and diversity, and, along with the entirety of the cosmos, give praise to its Creator. We recognize we are interconnected members of complex ecosystems, intricate webs of life, all of which have their origins in God's gracious act of creation (Preface.)

We are temporary (but active) stewards/ caretakers of creation, of the earthly resources and material goods that belong to God. We acknowledge that creation is in peril with destruction of ecosystems, overconsumption, shortsighted policies, poor management of natural resources, dependence on fossil fuels, and other unsustainable practices have severely impacted the fragile, natural ecosystems on which all of life depends.

Stewardship of Creation/ Environmental Racism

We confess that the negative impacts resulting from the degradation of the natural world have fallen disproportionately on marginalized communities, including indigenous tribes, religious and ethnic communities, people living in poverty, and other vulnerable groups. We, therefore, pledge to resist all forms of environmental exploitation, neglect and inequality. These practices condemn impoverished communities and developing countries to bear the brunt of hazardous environments, industrial pollution, toxic waste dumps and urban decay. Such behaviors constitute environmental racism. We oppose policies and practices that relegate marginalized communities to a permanent underclass status and ignore indigenous and other sources of communal wisdom, which call for air, land, and water to be treated with profound respect. (p.10)

We urge governments, businesses, and civic institutions to give priority to increasing access to prevention and treatment services which speaks of the disproportionate impact on marginalized communities and vulnerable

Additionally, these groups suffer disproportionately from higher rates of asthma, cancer, birth defects and other preventable medical conditions. These health problems are associated with pollutants and other chemicals in soil, water and air that affect our drinking water, foods and physical environment. We call for the institution of environmentally just principles, policies and practices. We affirm the wisdom and agency of indigenous peoples and marginalized populations to determine for themselves practices and policies that best provide for their basic human needs, including food, water, shelter, and land free from toxic wastes. Self-determination entails, among other things, access to all pertinent information and significant decision-making power over industrial, agricultural, and other developments that have potential to wreak significant harm on land, air and water.

Dependence on Fossil Fuels

From The United Methodist *Book of Resolutions* Resolution 4202 (p. 52): The public health risks of technological development and waste must be fully researched and openly assessed before new technologies are introduced into the home, the workplace, the community and the environment.

These Central Virginia Data centers are to be located near vulnerable groups – including nearby retirement communities. For example, an article, referenced [here](#), (Data Center Boom Risks Health of Already Vulnerable Communities. Cecilia Marrinan, T / Jun 12, 2025) cites increased asthma-related symptom cases that could be linked to data centers.)

Economic Community/Economic Justice

As United Methodists, we profess that all we are and all that we possess, belong to God. We are temporary stewards of the resources and material goods that we have accumulated. In our financial dealings and relationships no less than other aspects of discipleship, we are compelled to serve God and neighbor in all we do. (Social Principles, p. 15-19)

Corporate Responsibility. We believe that corporations and businesses, like all other human institutions, are charged with doing good, promoting equity and justice, and making positive contributions to communal life. Rather than merely producing profits for their shareholders, we believe corporations and businesses have significant roles to play in promoting the social and economic health and welfare of society. We call on corporations and businesses to place people above profits and to observe the highest ethical standards in conducting their business. We, therefore, urge corporate leaders and stockholders to comply with all laws, regulations, and international accords related to the defense of the environment, the safety and security of the workplace, and the guarantee of basic rights. We lament the long history of injustice and of violations of formal treaties and agreements. We hold corporations, businesses, and governments responsible for any violations or infringements of the rights and lands of individuals and communities and commit ourselves to advocate and work for justice. We commend socially responsible investment as an important mechanism to hold corporations accountable for promoting the common good. We, therefore, urge individuals, families, congregations, and other church bodies to educate themselves about the use of their investment funds and to leverage their economic clout by mandating the redirection of their funds from industries that negatively impact people or the environment. After all other avenues have been exhausted, other effective strategies include direct dialogue, joint shareholder actions, and boycott and divestment efforts.

There is a long history of Data centers in Virginia expanding into communities with no voice from the community.

1960's to Now: A Uniquely Virginian Predicament, at first

In the 1960s, the Department of Defense created an online network of universities, with offices located in Arlington, Virginia, where the internet was developed for commercial uses. America Online and UUNet located headquarters in Ashburn, Virginia, nearby, resulting in an internet exchange, with miles of fiber infrastructure to support a global communications system based in Loudoun County.

By 2008, the Department of Economic Revenue (DER), located in Loudoun County, adopted a strategic plan to diversify its tax base, by decreasing the percentage of residential tax revenues and by expanding the commercial tax base. This was considered an advantage to residential communities. The obvious sector of choice for expansion was the communications industry. <https://www.loudoun.gov/FAQ.aspx?QID=1800>.

Today, northwestern Virginia, previously known for its beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains, has become "Data Center Alley," instead. [Loudoun's DER reports](#) that there are "more than 30 million square feet of data centers, currently operational with another 5 million in development" and that in the past 14 years there has not been a day without data center construction.

Data center companies are incentivized by governments with deals for cheap land, low/no taxes, the infrastructure they rely on, such as global fiber optics cable, supporting transmissions from north to south and east to west.

Today in Central Virginia, Richmond in particular, offers all of this and is also home to several Amazon facilities, which owns and utilizes a significant percent of existing data centers.

In the Richmond area, the demands of these emerging technologies and infrastructure are a new conversation on the community level, since we are awakening to proposals for placement of data centers adjacent to our homes and neighborhoods, despite the intent of previously adopted zoning ordinances, designed to protect residential and community integrity.

Nonetheless, our local governments are considering unregulated development by the data center industry. If, in fact, they make such a careless decision, in pursuit of promised and astounding financial yields, the unquantified costs are sure to outweigh the financial benefits, based on numerous case studies.

Costs to the environment, and human health impact the community. Its finances and morale are hard to quantify in dollars and are largely ignored by those pursuing what they perceive to be significant financial yields. Local county governments, especially those without significant commercial tax bases, view data centers as the promise of a huge income stream to fund road improvements, schools, parks and other municipal services that otherwise would be a burden to the residential sector. It is a Catch-22, since the need and costs associated with development of this public infrastructure/data centers and associated services will increase, as well.

The financial promise of data centers is so tempting to those influenced by this misconception that local economic development authorities and governments often compete for data center contracts, despite the overwhelming opposition and registered opinions of the constituents they were elected to represent, and whose quality of life will be seriously impacted. Localities compete to secure data center contracts, in a “race to the bottom,” lowering existing environmental standards and protections, while increasing tax breaks for the wealthiest companies on the planet.

The burden for this unbridled development is opposed by local residents, who pay for the new transmission lines, electrical substations and even electricity dedicated to data centers, whose beneficiaries are wealthy alphabet companies like Amazon, Meta, Google, etc.

The Political Community (p. 32)

“Love is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment.” Very excellent things are spoken of love; it is the essence, the spirit, the life of all virtue. It is not only the first and great command, but it is all the commandments in one. “Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are amiable,” or honorable; “if there be any virtue, if there be any praise,” they are all comprised in this one word,—love.

Our involvement in political systems is rooted in the Gospel imperative to love our neighbors, to do justice, and to care for the vulnerable. As United Methodists, we acknowledge that love requires responsible political action and engagement aimed at the betterment of society and the promotion of the common good. We acknowledge that such political engagement demands humility and mindfulness of our own complicity in perpetuating injustice. It also necessitates compassion, prayer, and a willingness to discern God’s guidance. We believe in the inherent worth of all people, which is established through God’s gracious act of creation and most fully revealed in the power of Jesus’s life, death and resurrection...

Governmental Responsibilities/ Church and Governments. (p.32)

We affirm that both church and state have vital and distinct roles to play in relation to the larger society. Though the formal relationships between religious communities and governments vary from country to country, we generally affirm the independence and integrity of both institutions, and we advocate for a relationship of mutual respect in which neither institution seeks to dominate or unduly influence the other. We affirm that every form of government stands under God’s judgment

and must therefore be held accountable for protecting the innocent, guaranteeing basic freedoms and liberties, protecting the natural world, and establishing just, equitable, and sustainable economies. We urge those elected or appointed to public posts or holding other positions in government to act as responsible leaders and stewards of the authority and resources entrusted to them. We call on all government officials to aspire to the highest standards of professionalism, honesty and integrity. Furthermore, we urge all governments to adopt policies and practices that guarantee accountability and transparency in fostering and maintaining the trust of the public. John Wesley, "The Circumcision of the Heart." P. 32

As was stated in the beginning: In the End, what do they have? Data centers consume and impact vast quantities of land, water and air. Their intensive systems emit diesel exhaust, particulate matter, low frequency sound waves, noise, water pollution and overtax the electric grid, while utility costs are often doubled as residents in their communities pay for infrastructure demands. The data epidemic is creating unsustainable conditions, and is becoming a core challenge in the modern digital age we find ourselves trying to navigate.

The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church, wisely observes: "We acknowledge that unsustainable human activities have placed the entirety of God's creation in peril"...and acknowledges that: "sustainability is crucial to the development of ecologically sound policies and practices that seek to restore balance to the natural world and end disruptive relationships between humanity and the rest of God's creation."

It is the opinion of the Board of Church and Society of Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church that continued building and using the resources of the Commonwealth of Virginia for new and expanded data centers is not sustainable, nor helpful for the long term health of our Commonwealth's ecosystems: human, or animal, plant or mineral -and in the integration all of God's earthly creation.

Signed:

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