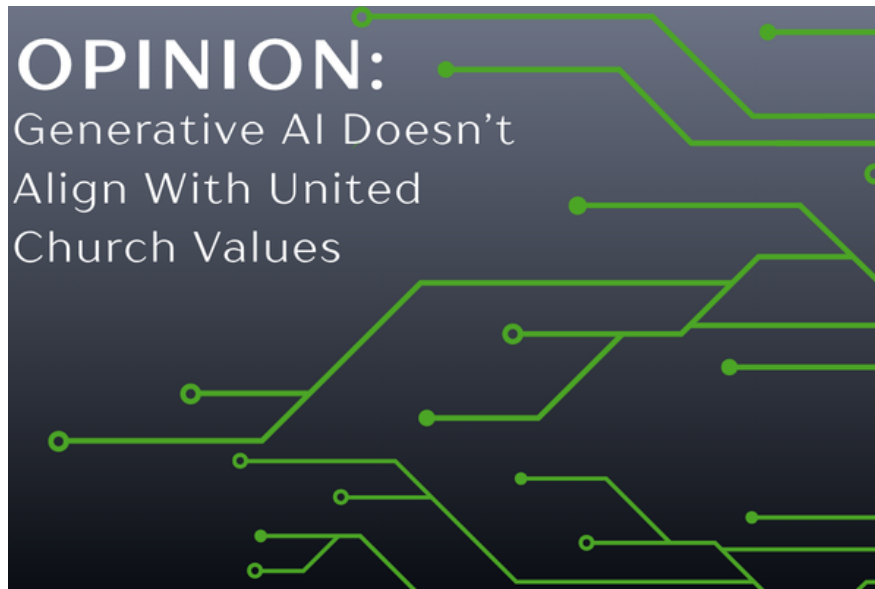




*Opinion piece by Ben Woods*

Something sinister is seeping into our lives. According to its creators and investors, it will soon be inescapable, and all of the harm it causes is a necessary evil. I'm talking about generative AI.

It is my firm belief, as a Christian and a young person who will have to deal with the long-term consequences, that generative AI is harmful for our world and society. The use of generative AI goes against many of the United Church of Canada's justice initiatives. As Christians, we are called to care for all of God's creations and to strive toward justice, and generative AI goes against these principles. The United Church should assess the impacts of generative AI and in particular, take into account environmental impact, environmental racism, and colonialism. Additionally, the Living Skies Region should stand against the construction of data centres in Saskatchewan, like the [Bell hyperscale data centre](#).

AI stands for "artificial intelligence" which is not a new concept. AI can include a range of things like your phone's GPS, personalized algorithms such as those on Netflix or Facebook, and game opponents like a computer in online chess. *Generative* AI creates "new" content. Generative AI includes products like ChatGPT, Claude, Dall-E, and more. These products are often just labeled as "AI." I will use the term "generative AI" for specificity.

Generative AI products are advertised as tools that can be used to increase productivity, simplify research and writing, create new images, and do whatever else we ask of them. I have some objections.

It may seem like the use of generative AI allows for shortcuts and more free time, but in practical application, generative AI contributes to the culture of toxic productivity that commands us to do *more* in a shorter period of time. According to a survey from [The Upwork Research Institute](#), 77% of workers found that generative AI *increased* their workload, because superiors demanded more work and because of time spent reviewing AI-generated content. Taking the time to use discernment is an important part of writing processes and other workflows, *especially* in matters of faith. Generative AI cannot use discernment, an issue when it comes to issues such as faith and social justice. Generative AI models are also prone to racial and gender bias in their outputs. Generative AI frequently “[hallucinates](#)” sources or does not provide them, another concern when researching important topics.

A common criticism of generative AI is [environmental toll](#). Generative AI needs data centres which require huge amounts of electricity to operate and huge amounts of fresh water to cool hardware. This results in more carbon dioxide emissions, large strain on municipal water supplies and local ecosystems, and a need to use fossil fuels in other areas. Researchers at the University of California predict that generative AI demands could consume [1.1 trillion to 1.7 trillion gallons of water](#) a year by 2027. The United Church acknowledges that we live in a [Climate Emergency](#) and calls on us to live in respect with creation, seek balance, and repair relations. Using generative AI does not align with these goals. Creating data centres means mining for resources in dangerous and extractive ways, such as in Chile, which Karen Hao describes as a “ground zero for a new scale of extractivism” when it comes to generative AI<sup>1</sup>. Many resources are extracted from Chile to build data centres, and many data centres are built in Chile regardless of nearby residents’ wishes. This is something the United Church stands against in its statement on [mining and resource extraction](#), where we are called to “resist that which destroys the health of creation and its communities.”

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Hao, *Empire of AI* (United States: Penguin Press, 2025), 273.

Anyone living near an AI data centre is harmed by the use of generative AI. Residents living next to a Meta data centre in Mansfield, Georgia cannot use appliances requiring water and [no longer have reliably safe drinking water](#) due to the data centre's use of water. Living near a data centre means constant noise pollution. Residents are often not informed about what chemicals or toxins are released into the air, such as formaldehyde. Data centres contribute to [environmental racism](#), which Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. defines as the deliberate targeting of predominantly BIPOC and low-income communities as sites for polluting facilities.

While the United Church has no official statement on specifically environmental racism yet, it is a part of racism and concern for the climate. During 40 Days of Engagement on Anti-Racism in 2023, Dr. Ingrid Waldron spoke on [environmental racism in Canada](#). Through the definition Dr. Waldron uses, generative AI data centres are an example of environmental racism due to their location and the lack of power affected communities have to resist the building of data centres. Dr. Waldron also elaborates on implementation of environmental policy as part of environmental racism. Many policy and decision makers hold the viewpoint of "I need to protect my community, this needs to go elsewhere." Most of those deciding where data centres are built are not impacted by them.

In Canada, groups are already fighting against AI data centres. Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation is in a legal battle with O'Leary Digital regarding the proposed [Wonder Valley AI Project](#), which would be the largest data centre in the world. Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation wants the project to undergo a full federal assessment on environmental impact before moving forward; there are no regulatory systems for generative AI data centre development in Alberta.

In Saskatchewan, the group No Data Centres on Treaty Land has been organizing and protesting against the proposed Bell hyperscale data centre in Regina<sup>2</sup>. The group cites a variety of concerns: environmental impact, generative AI's use in illegal military attacks, surveillance, job loss, spread of misinformation, health impacts, threatening of treaty rights, and undemocratic process. I spoke with one of the group's

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<sup>2</sup> Taya (Organizer from No Data Centres on Treaty Land), via phone call with Ben Woods, July 2026.

organizers, Taya, to get a firmer grasp on the group's concerns and the story behind the data centre.

Taya explained that Bell's hyperscale AI data centre project did not involve any consultation with any affected communities of Regina, Sherwood, or George Gordon First Nation. The project was only revealed to the public after being [leaked by CBC](#). The project lacks transparency; members of the public have been kept out of meetings about the data centre, and Bell is still unclear about what resources are needed and where they will be drawn from and/or disposed of. The government of Saskatchewan has not performed an environmental assessment on the project. No Data Centres on Treaty Land organizes under the obligation of caring for Treaty agreements and being stewards of the land. The group says the land should remain as prairie, which is beneficial for plants and animals. Taya also spoke about what we have seen from data centres, that they expose nearby residents to new health concerns, noise pollution, and use huge amounts of water and electricity. Many data centres have been proposed in areas with higher proportions of Indigenous peoples and/or a more recent history of Residential Schools, such as Regina and Kamloops. It is impossible to divorce the approach of data centres from environmental racism and colonialism.

The United Church has apologized for its role in [Residential Schools and colonization](#), seeking reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. It is then necessary to listen to and support Indigenous peoples and actively resist continued colonization. The progression of generative AI has been extractivist and colonialist every step of the way. In our conversation, Taya described how the mentality of generative AI companies is reminiscent of colonialist empires. These companies, like empires, lay claim to resources that are not their own, exploit and harm Indigenous peoples, and make grand existential arguments about the necessity of their "projects." The argument goes that generative AI may be a necessary evil (if it is called an evil at all) for the benefit of society or to advance civilization. Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, has referred to the company as an [empire](#).<sup>3</sup>

I often hear an argument that generative AI is a morally neutral tool, it is people who use it for good or bad. While I understand where this argument comes from, I

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Hao, *Empire of AI*, (United States: Penguin Press, 2025), 141.

absolutely reject it, as even the “good” uses bring harm unto others. Generative AI will never be a morally neutral tool, and when the church comes to a decision about how generative AI is used, this should be acknowledged. While I want to live in a world where the church I belong to is against generative AI and nobody uses it, I know this is impossible. The approach will likely be “here’s how to use generative AI responsibly.” Not only because individuals will choose to use generative AI, but because companies like Google, Microsoft, and Meta have forced generative AI into their products without giving users a choice to turn it off.

Often when I confide my concerns about generative AI with someone, they imagine I am envisioning a sci-fi film, where intelligent robots enslave humanity. I don’t believe this will happen any more than I believe a single magical hero would save us from it. I am no longer concerned, I am angry. I am angry about the mass theft of art and writing used to train generative AI. I am angry about students not learning because a generative AI chatbot can “write” an essay for them. I am angry about the harms generative AI causes the environment. I am angry that generative AI chatbots have encouraged [vulnerable people toward suicide](#). I am angry that [school shooters](#) have used chatbots to [plan their attacks](#). I am angry about the use of generative AI to produce child sexual abuse material or [non-consensual deepfake pornography](#). I am angry about the influx of misinformation generative AI has wrought. I am angry about the exploitation of workers from Kenya and Venezuela to train generative AI models for less than \$2 USD an hour, if not for mere cents<sup>4</sup>. I am angry about the extractivism that generative AI companies commit. I am angry that the United States military sees it fit to use [generative AI products](#). I am angry about the way AI has begun replacing real human connection.

We are called to care for our neighbours and for creation. This is a core part of our theology, and it is not enough to say it without living it. The United Church of Canada should take a stance against generative AI and the construction of generative AI data centres.

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Hao, *Empire of AI*, (United States: Penguin Press, 2025), 137, 197.

*Ben Woods is a 21 year old artist and writer from the Living Skies Region who has been part of the United Church of Canada their entire life.*