

# Living Lightly on the Grid

MARIANNE PETERS

I admit it. I can barely function without electricity, especially when it comes to my morning coffee. I've been trying to be more conscious of my energy use, though. Where I live, the power grid mostly runs on coal, a fossil fuel. By using less electricity, I can steward God's resources and—in these belt-tightening times—also pinch pennies.

In the winter, when I think electricity, I think heat. Installing a programmable thermostat saves money and conserves energy, and this past fall I determined to finally program mine. Before I did, I discussed it with my dad, the only person allowed to touch the thermostat at my parents' house. He monitors the furnace's output like a nervous NASA technician during a shuttle mission.

"It's not hard to program your thermostat," Dad scoffed from his Lazyboy, where he was watching a Saturday football game. "Get out your owner's manual."

I hadn't read my thermostat's owner's manual lately. Actually, ever.

"Just follow the directions," Dad instructed. "It's easy." After a pause, he said, "Did you install the thermostat I got you? The Honeywell? I wouldn't have anything but a Honeywell."

Gulp. I had forgotten about the Honeywell.

A programmable thermostat makes it convenient to save from 5 to 15 percent on heating. Rather than constantly adjusting the temperature manually, which is less efficient, homeowners simply program the unit to lower the temperature when they



are absent or asleep. Programmable thermostats can be retrofitted, so it's possible to keep the same furnace and replace the thermostat.

I followed EPA guidelines and set my device to sixty-eight degrees during the day and sixty-two degrees between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. Some might say those temperatures are chilly; however, winter air is dry air, and the warmer it is, the drier it is. Keeping the temperature lower actually makes for a more comfortable house in that respect. I also keep a fleecy sweater nearby just in case and throw extra blankets on the beds. It's tempting to forget about dressing for the season because we are used to overheated homes. Rather than nudging up the heat, I generate my own warmth with comfortable layers.

Though I prefer spring and summer, I've learned to love the pleasures of winter too—slipping between flannel sheets, wearing fuzzy socks, sipping hot chocolate, and snuggling with my kids in front of the fireplace. I've learned to appreciate the change of seasons. I've also learned to appreciate long underwear.

Along with reducing the temperatures in the house, I use ceiling fans to distribute the heat by setting my fans on low speed, rotating clockwise. This creates an updraft that forces the warm air at the ceiling back down again. Ceiling fans use much less electricity than heating or air conditioning systems; they are a great

money-saver year round.

Taking measures to keep my house warm means I also need to make sure that I seal the leaks around door, windows, and other nooks and crannies to keep the cold air out, while still allowing ventilation. Newer houses tend to be tighter, which helps with energy efficiency, but indoor pollution occurs if homes are not properly ventilated. Opening windows once in a while, plus using various types of fans (bathroom fans, whole-house fans, attic fans) keeps the air moving, preventing condensation that leads to mold and mildew, as well as airing out volatile organic compounds and cooking odors. A blast of icy fresh air can have a cleansing effect—I sometimes leave the windows open just while I vacuum or dust a room to get rid of stale winter smells.

Finding ways to save electricity can be a game—how many money-saving ideas can your family think of? All of these ideas also work well for churches. Websites like planetgreen. discovery.com and www.epa.gov have great suggestions. If you aren't sure how to start, get an energy audit from your service provider. There may be a fee, but the information you'll glean on ways to save energy will more than pay for the consultation.

And you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you're living more lightly on the grid. ■

Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana.