

THE FAITHFUL CONSUMER

By Sarah Streed

This is the second of a monthly column in which I try to connect faith and the environment in a real, practical way. At the end of each column look for the tip which tells you, the reader, a specific way to reduce your impact upon the environment.

Several people approached me after last month's column, asking, "What is green power and how do I get it?" The most rudimentary answer is that "green power" is power from renewable energy sources that can be **renewed**, such as wind, solar, hydropower, and energy from plant matter. These are in contrast to **nonrenewable** energy sources such as coal and fossil fuels, which are used once and used up. (You can sign up for all or a portion of your monthly energy bill to be used for renewable energy by calling your utility or simply indicating this on your bill.)

Most of us have the idea that electricity is clean and nonpolluting, probably because it seems that way when used in the home, but the fact is that most electricity is generated by burning coal, which is enormously dirty and polluting. Using renewable energy solves this problem, but so little is used; for example, only two percent of Stoughton Utilities' power is from renewable energy sources. So my question was: Can choosing renewable energy really make a difference? I went hunting for an answer and ended up talking for almost an hour to Jim Schieble of Stoughton Utilities.

Stoughton Utilities' renewable energy sources include two wind turbines in Worthington, Minnesota; one hydro plant—a refurbished dam—and, believe it or not, two sewer plants, where natural gas is made from organic materials (read: human waste.) But like nearly all utilities, Stoughton Utilities relies upon non-renewable energy from coal-fired power plants (which create tons of pollution) and natural gas (which is better than coal-fire but definitely not in the same league as renewable.)

Jim felt the current "green power" program is a good thing; however, he wasn't as excited as I thought he would be. When I asked him if someone could really make a difference by purchasing green energy (expecting him to laud its merits—it's his program, after all) he hesitated.

"Yeah, it makes a difference," he said, "My wife and I purchase renewable energy for our whole bill since it's just the two of us. But the way to really make a difference is to conserve energy."

This surprised me. Sure, I grew up with a father who insisted that us children turn out lights, turn down the heat, in short, to my child's mind, compromise our comfort in every way to save money. But did this have an effect upon global warming? After talking more with Jim, I got it: Designating renewable energy is good—but it's still using energy—and we Americans use way too much. That's where conservation comes in: To

conserve energy, to use less of it, so that when we do choose renewable, it is a significant portion of our nation's energy use—that would really make a difference.

In The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices the authors identify heating, hot water and air conditioning followed by appliances (refrigerators, lighting and televisions in that order) and lighting as being the areas of household operations that place the greatest burden on the environment. (Recall that in last month's column it is Household Operations, Food and Transportation that account for the majority of emissions of greenhouse gases, i.e. global warming.)

I asked Jim about the best ways to conserve energy in the home. He gave me the following list:

*To save on heating, check your windows. If you live in an old house, replace windows that are broken or in need of repair. If you have double-paned glass and there is fogging between the panes, this is, in Jim's words, a "failed window." (I've always called it broken.) Also put weatherstripping around doors leading to the outside and/or the door or scuttlehatch leading to the attic. If you live in a new house, you probably have new windows, but it's probably big, so that uses a lot of energy. I live in a big house, but I rationalize that there are seven of us and we need the room. (Yes, time for true confessions: My husband and I have five children. Since overpopulation is one of the greatest worldwide environmental threats, this would seemingly be inconsistent with my environmental stance, but I'll explain briefly and go more in depth in future columns: Over four years ago, my husband and I adopted the two children of my foster brother, a Cambodian refugee who joined my family growing up.

* Turn off lights and appliances. (My dad was right!) When Jim visits folks wanting to know how to save money on their bills, he usually finds they're leaving TVs and lights on, leaving the computer on. "Remember, Jim says, "a sleeping computer uses 100 watts. One customer had three computers on and asked, 'Does that really make a difference? I did the tables and factored in the three computers on sleep all the time and answered that, yes, it did."

*Use compact fluorescent light bulbs. (CFLs) Sometimes hardware stores run specials on CFLs and they're dirt cheap. For newer homes that have track lighting or recessed flood lights, look for the PAR lamp bulb that's like a headlight in a car. The 90 watt standard floodlight works for most of the lighting in newer homes.

Conservation is one of the best ways to protect our earth as well as getting at the root of America's energy problem, which is **overconsumption**. We Americans are guilty of excess in most things, energy notwithstanding. Rabbi Marla Feldman, President of the Jewish Community Council of Metro Detroit, said in 2001, "The Judaic teachings are very clear: God's covenant is with all of creation, from generation to generation. Humans are to carefully steward the Earth and its resources in ways that do not bring harm to our world." This tenet is echoed in all the faiths.

One of the best ways to steward our energy resources is to simply make our footprint smaller. The American Indians speak of "treading lightly upon the earth." Today's American does just the opposite, stomping on our world, crushing and destroying with each heavy footstep.

February's tip: Conserve energy. Purchase green power, yes, but don't stop with that: Actively conserve energy throughout the year, using Jim's list above.

Until next month, then, God bless our world—and tread lightly in all your daily habits.

Sarah Streed is the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign, a group of people of all faiths working a just and sustainable future. Go to www.wicec.org or email sarahstreed@wicec.org

All rights reserved by Sarah Streed or WICEC.