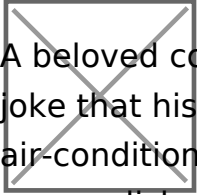


Losing Our Cool

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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A beloved colleague in ministry, a brilliant and humble guy, used to joke that his one real claim to fame was that he had successfully air-conditioned two churches during his career. That's a real accomplishment—his ability to run a capital campaign, to rally the troops for the work and fundraising, always impressed me.

But a recent book has made me reflect on my envy of my colleague's ever-temperate pulpit. *Losing Our Cool: Uncomfortable Truths About Our Air-Conditioned World (and Finding New Ways to Get Through the Summer)* is an eye-opening and guilt-inducing look at the ways in which air conditioning has become a fixture in American culture—and at the impact of this development on our environment, lifestyle, politics and health.

Author

Stan Cox knows the summer heat. The Land Institute scientist grew up in sweltering Georgia and settled on the sun-baked plains of Kansas. While his book is largely devoid of autobiographical detail, this personal history seems to lend an empathetic tone that helps his devastating analysis go down. Without this, I would have given us up as a doomed culture, turned up the air and waited for the coming climate apocalypse. Instead I've tried to turn our air off more often, to close shades, to drink more water, to strategically position fans and seat myself near the cross-ventilation.

On the environmental front, the causes for despair are myriad. Cox understands how deeply ingrained this technology has become in mere decades; he knows that there are market and health and political concerns at play. As air conditioning grew more energy efficient, American homes got larger—the increased efficiency didn't reduce consumption but simply made it possible and

affordable to cool larger spaces. Cox depicts a difficult bind: the more we use our air conditioning, the hotter the climate—and the less accustomed we are to dealing with the heat.

The social ramifications are rather obvious. We're less likely to go outside on hot days, or even warm days, than in years and generations past. Our kids would rather veg in front of the television than get all sweaty in the backyard. In my own household, we drive to the park instead of walking or riding bikes. As a teenager, I never worried about weight gain in the winter, because I always lost it again in the summer—too hot to eat big meals, spending time swimming and playing, sweating the pounds away even while reading. Not so in my largely air-conditioned adult life.

Cox points out that the problem is not *that* we cool ourselves and homes so much as *how* we do. Our preference for central air over window units puts Americans' energy usage is at sky-high levels. We spend more energy on air-conditioning alone than the entire continent of Africa spends on all of its energy needs combined. Our consumption is well beyond our nation's measurable need for cooling. The collective confusion of wants and needs—see this week's lectionary theme of "daily bread"—makes us a country of comfortably chilled sinners.

The ways in which American Christians choose to engage the broader culture are manifold. Some reject much; others accept and adopt much. We raise questions about technology and its impact on the practice of our faith—cell phones and Sabbath keeping, Facebook and community building, ubiquitous media and our understanding of sexuality and relationships. But those on all sides of the culture wars have been pretty unanimous in our acceptance of air conditioning as an unambiguous good.

Cox urges us to reconsider. Reading him leaves me hopeful, because I believe we can learn to live within our energy means—and to remember and appreciate what is wonderful about hot, sweaty, languid summers. But mostly I am hopeful that I am now well equipped to shoot down any

demands for a church capital campaign to air condition the building.