

Fewer people moving doesn't necessarily mean more in church

August 4, 2015

ORANGE PARK, Fla. (BNG)—New research suggests Americans increasingly are choosing to put down roots where they currently live, a finding that raises questions about church health.

A recent [Barna Group](#) project showed mobility has declined overall over many years. Most adults—59 percent—either plan never to move again or are doubtful they will.



Kevin Collison

The finding intrigues ministers and congregational coaches long concerned about the decline of religious institutions in the United States. Could this development, if it holds, be a key to both the transformation and revival of an ailing American church?

The possibility more people may be arriving and staying in a community

“can be a good thing” for churches located there, said Kevin Collison, pastor at [Island View Baptist Church in Orange Park, Fla.](#)

But it’s also no guarantee those choosing to stay nearby will come to church—or keep coming back once they do, Collison said.

That’s because there are so many other places in a community where people can connect and feel a sense of belonging.

Community: Church, CrossFit or microbrewery?

“The church has to realize we are now in competition with other community forces,” he said. “CrossFit may be their community, or maybe the microbrewery is their community.”

Ditto for coffee shops and farmers’ markets, Collison added.

In other words, people staying put may present as many challenges for congregations as it does opportunities, he said.

“I think churches are going to have to be adaptable enough to be communities for younger generations,” he said.

That must look different than the typical post-World War II church. Congregations must offer more than Sunday services and Wednesday night programs and expect people to show up, Collison said.

People who decide to stay in an area usually do so because there is something meaningful keeping them there.



David Hull “Is it going to be the church or not?” he asked.

If the answer is to be the church, then its members must remember their calls to evangelize a population hungry for meaningful relationships, said David Hull, southeast coordinator for [The Center for Healthy Churches](#).

“No longer can the church sit back and wait for people to come,” Hull said.

“Now we have to be even more intentional in saying we have an opportunity to invite you into a beloved community that is different than any other option open to you.”

Hull has seen evidence of the accuracy of Barna’s research through the coaching he’s provided search committees seeking new pastors and other ministers.

Increasingly, churches are hearing back from potential candidates unwilling to relocate for an open pulpit or other position, Hull said.

Calling staff from within congregations

“This is why we are seeing more and more churches calling staff members from within their congregations,” he said.

But the trend is positive for institutions built on the premise of authentic relationships between members and with Jesus Christ, Hull added.

“That’s the difference from the fitness club and everywhere else,” he said.

The Barna study also found some generational distinctions at play in the trend away from geographical mobility.



Roxanne Stone “When asked how much longer they plan to live in their current city or town, Millennials are significantly more likely than older generations to say they plan to move in the short-term,” Barna reported.

Research found 14 percent of Millennials, compared to 6 percent of the general population, say they will remain in a place for less than one year.

While those statistics change with age, Barna’s Roxanne Stone said churches should remember the importance relationships play in decisions to move or not move.

“Churches and ministry leaders in particular, should pay attention to the significant pull that relationships have on people,” said Stone, a Barna vice president. “Relationships are the primary reason people live where they live.”

Hull agreed.

“That’s great for church,” he said. “We are a place of community and

relationships."