

Evangelism in a Society that Moves A Lot

[Written for P.T. 341: Theology and Practice of Evangelism, Prof. Valleskey, April 11, 2000]

By Christopher S. Doerr

Introduction

To say people in our society “move a lot” refers to “internal migration.” Internal migration is a change in residence without a change of country. In the main, internal migration does not alter WELS evangelism efforts. No matter who lives where for how long, the gospel will not change. Nor will anything replace the gospel as evangelism’s sole tool.

However, in two ways, internal migration does externally affect evangelism efforts. First, congregations are subject to space and time. Because of that, congregations confine their evangelism efforts to limited geographical areas. They evangelize those living in their limited geographical area. Migration determines who lives there and for how long. Second, evangelism includes follow-up. If possible, congregations apply the powerful gospel to their prospects over and over again. But follow-up requires keeping track of where the prospects live. Migration makes this keeping track a never-ending task.

How great are the effects of internal migration on evangelism? Do pastors notice these effects? How can the congregation respond to these effects?

The statistics in this paper came especially from data gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau. Other observations herein were gathered from twenty-eight WELS pastors. They all were responding to an e-mail survey. The paper will follow the same outline as the survey: (1) statistics about internal migration; (2) effects of internal migration; (3) efforts to reach recent movers; (4) logistics of such efforts; and (5) the pastors’ concerns about this topic.

Statistics concerning U.S. internal migration

Our nation is familiar with changes of address

How often do our fellow citizens change addresses? According to Charles F. Longino, Jr., only Canada and Australia compare with the U.S. Over a given five year period, nearly one-half of all Americans will have new addresses. The average American lives at fourteen different addresses in his lifetime. And no more than two to three percent of American adults live at the same address their whole life. Another author called geographic mobility part of “the essence of the American experience.”

Down from approximately twenty percent per year in the 1950s, the Census Bureau said sixteen percent of Americans changed addresses in 1997-1998. That’s over 265 million movers. However, ten percent of those are “local movers.” That is, their new address is in the same county as their old was.

Most of the twenty-eight pastors thought these statistics right on, if not too low. One typed, “On some city streets, there are more homes for sale than not.” Rev. M. J. Otterstatter matched his congregation’s statistics exactly to the Census Bureau’s. He wrote, “In five years we have taken in 72 members and transferred out 68. That is about 50% of our total congregation.” Some regions see more of this migration than others do. A pastor in Mesa, AZ, wrote, “Mesa grew from about 180,000 in 1990 to about 375,000 in 2000... during this same time, 70 people moved out of the area for every 100 that moved in.”

Among the various age brackets, young adults migrate most often

According to the Census Bureau, Americans ages twenty to twenty-four move twice as often as other Americans do. The pastors have noticed this trend. They mentioned how their own members in that age group were frequently changing address. Two small town pastors admitted that this age group seemed eager to leave their communities to search for jobs elsewhere: “Once they move away for college they usually don’t come back.”

What does this particular statistic say to pastors? Yes, prospects of that age group will need to be reached quickly. But it’s also a special opportunity for ministry to congregation members. The pastor who knows his young people will soon be leaving town can train them as missionaries. He can assume they’ll be well placed to spread the gospel in some other part of the U.S. In view of this, he can make especially sure they’ll also be well practiced for doing that lay mission-work. Or a pastor wrote, “One of my jobs as pastor is helping in moving either in or out.” He is taking advantage of one last chance to bless and encourage his young missionaries.

Movers’ destinations aren’t so predictable

That the future is unknown doesn’t keep periodicals from trying to predict it. But their predictions are not very specific. Some predict a great influx into metropolitan downtown areas. Others foresee millions of baby boomers moving out into the country.

Many of the pastors were skeptical of predictions. One pointed out that more old people “out in the country” isn’t a very new notion. The two small town pastors above mentioned an exodus of young people. In their eyes, this exodus has already been increasing the average age of the rural population. A Tampa, FL, pastor wondered how the articles were defining the “country.” He described a city near him: “Brandon is considered the ‘country’ and its population is over 150,000.”

Perceived effects of migration on a congregation’s evangelism efforts

Migration has its benefits

Overwhelmingly, the pastors mentioned one main positive effect of migration. It brings more people within range of the congregation’s evangelism efforts. One pastor went so far as to say that new residents in the community are his congregation’s “bread and butter.” They’re the mainstay of his prospect list.

Another frequently mentioned plus is that recent-movers may be more willing to try new things. For example, they may be more willing to try a new church. Pastor Roger W. Huffman expanded on this,

Those who are moving to look for a place where they can be part of a community are ripe for the message of a community formed around the gospel of Jesus Christ. The baby boomers may be motivated by a sense of longing (seeking for what is missing) and a desire to give back. The gospel fulfills the longing like nothing else can. I also sense the youth generations are also looking for a sense of being connected to something greater than the hype of Madison Ave. It should still be true, that the unsettling character of moving provides a window for our care and the gospel.

A third benefit of the many movers in America is that “good WELS members” come a congregation’s way more often. One pastor said the mobility could give your church “fresh blood in all positions.” But a California pastor put this into perspective,

Once in a while a good WELS member will move into our town and become a great asset to our congregation. However, the usual case is that WELS members from the Midwest drop off their transfer along the way and leave the WELS altogether. It is said that the

white on top of Pike's Peak is not snow; it is the transfers of WELS people moving west.

In other words, migration is a mixed blessing.

Migration can be a nuisance

In a society that moves a lot, one's prospects move a lot. Nine of the pastors bemoaned this. Prospects move before the pastor gets them to visit worship. Or they move before they finish BIC. Or they move before the pastor can nurture their newly sprouted faith.

Members move just as much as the prospects do. This means smaller congregations struggle with losing core members. Pastor Thomas Zarling explained,

It is emotionally difficult to see a newly trained Christian leave – Emotional for three reasons. One, the relationship that has been created is severed; Two, the loss of a worker to the local congregation; Three, the weakness of some remaining members who are looking for people numbers to show outward numerical success. Not only does a new replacement need to be trained (a positive for the kingdom) but some remaining members need to be reminded of (trained) on how the Lord uses his gifts in people in more than one locality.

A rural pastor echoed Rev. Zarling's last thought, "The new arrivals I do get, I usually no more than get them trained, and they move to the big city. It's a running gag with some of my conference members, that I am one of their better evangelism programs."

America's frequent address changing has other detriments. The congregation feels unstable. Members who aren't in town to stay feel little ownership of the congregation. More prospects moving in means more work. And more work means more stress, so that one pastor commented, "It seems that you're never done." These are some of the negatives.

Overall, the pastors were optimistic

The survey asked what kind of migration affected evangelism most. Most pastors said migration into the area had the most effect. These pastors could have focused on the opportunities lost as prospects moved away. But they realized that God was using the moving vans to bring needy souls within range.

Special efforts to reach recent-movers in a community

Address-providers get mixed reviews

Some congregations try specifically to reach new neighbors. How do they find those new neighbors? A few pastors said their communities were conveniently small. They trained their members to watch for people moving in. Another pastor had a member working in the local school administration office. That member informed him whenever anyone new would move into town.

Another way to find new residents in the area is to pay for the information. Nineteen of the pastors were using or once used such a service. None of the pastors were at all emphatic that the services brought in many visitors to worship or BIC. But they mentioned several companies that provided consistent and reliable data.

On the other hand, some men had complaints about this method. They say the companies fold. They "never seemed effective." The data was out-of-date. One pastor said he "n-e-v-e-r e-v-e-r" found it "to be at all useful." A common complaint was if the service didn't give phone numbers. And in another case the service gave more names than the congregation could keep up with.

Three main program options target recent-movers

How do congregations approach a new neighbor? One option is to target the whole community, which of course includes recent-movers. This can be done through VBS-type programs, Jesus Cares programs, mass media, flyers, canvasses, and friendship evangelism. Several pastors called programs like these their congregation's recent-mover outreach program.

A second option is to piggyback onto a community "welcome wagon" program. Several communities have a secular program that welcomes all new residents. The welcome includes a personal visit and a package full of ads, coupons, and gifts. The congregation can supply brochures, bread mixes, etc. to be included in the welcome packages.

A third option is to work from a purchased recent-mover list, as described above. Pastors who use this option did three things with the list. Some did all three, others just one or two. Most of them had something to mail to all the people on the list: a card, invitations, a letter, etc. Others telephoned the people on the list. Some only mailed after telephone calls revealed that the prospect was interested. And some personally visited the prospects on the list. With a large list, this only followed the phone calls. With a smaller list, one could visit the front door of all the people on the list.

Logistics of recent-mover evangelism

The pastors at least do the follow-up

The survey asked who in the congregation was responsible for outreach to recent-movers. It also asked how that arrangement was working. The pastors had a variety of answers. But they didn't always answer the second part of the question. A pattern started to show. The more the pastor was involved in the first part of the question, the more likely he answered the second. It could merely be coincidence. Or it could show that the pastor's direct involvement increased his awareness of how the outreach was going.

In five instances, the pastor said he did the outreach program solo. Four out of five times he said it wasn't all getting done. It was "hit and miss"; mailings got sent out, but visits weren't made; it consumed a lot of time; or it got done in cycles, sometimes yes and sometimes no.

Yes, there were plenty of answers in which the pastor had help within the congregation. Sometimes this meant more help than other times. For example, one pastor had a combined Stewardship/Evangelism Committee. It mostly did Stewardship and no Evangelism. In another example, it sounded as though the pastor had a very helpful evangelism chairman. But when it came to reaching new movers, both of the men were "too busy to make it a top priority."

But a close look at the pastors' replies again encouraged me. Many of the respondents have already trained their members to help with each phase of this kind of outreach work. It is for the pastor to have the final follow-up responsibilities. That's because, if follow-up is to lead to membership, someone must discern how well the prospect's confession matches up with the congregation's confession. Pastors have the most training for this type of discernment. But up to that point, pastors can use and apparently are using lay people for everything, including follow-up visits. Pastors in the survey emphasized their roles as trainer and leader. They are the ones who get the program "up and running." Then they let their lay people "take over." Several of the men have evangelism committee members who are doing the visits without the pastor along. Another pastor, Rev. Thomas Zarling, wrote eloquently about sharing this follow-up with lay people:

Each prospect needs more than one person talking with him/her about Jesus. The outside credibility of more than one person is important. In our setting we are now trying to conduct all calls with two or more people. Whether pastor, elder, or outreach person, if it is practical, someone else goes along. – Outreach is the congregation going to the

community, not the pastor going to the community. – The pastor’s efforts in outreach are much less effective than that of a satisfied customer, namely a parishioner, when talking to another about Jesus. The pastor’s main role is to take, train, encourage, and support members in evangelism rather than doing it for them. Pastors need to motivate, mobilize the Universal Priesthood for outreach. As the Japanese Admiral said after Pearl Harbor, “I am afraid we have awakened a sleeping giant,” so the pastor’s main role is to awaken the sleeping giant.

Far from diminishing the pastor’s role in evangelizing new movers, in sharing the follow-up work the pastor increases his importance. He begins to see, in his congregation, the answer to St. Paul’s prayer for Philemon: “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (Philemon 6)

Most of the pastors kept track of prospect database themselves

Thirteen of the men said they were the sole data-keepers. None of them had anything bad to say about how that was working. None of them had much good to say either. This was in strong contrast with the situations in which the laity handled the data. Pastors described them as “excellent,” doing an “excellent job,” a “very good job,” and “quite well.” One pastor admitted a layman would do better. Unlike with prospect follow-up, it seems as though more pastors should consider handing data keeping over to the laity.

The pastors realize their greatest tool to increase member involvement

Question number eleven asked, “If you wanted to get the congregation more involved in reaching out to ‘new neighbors,’ how would you go about that?” One can smile to note the men’s answers. Almost half of them said the same thing. This common solution is simply encouraging members and reminding them to get more involved. The gospel is the sole tool of evangelism. The gospel is also the sole power-source for evangelism. Pastor Eich put it this way, “Continually remind them of the blessings of the Gospel and that we are called to share them.” Pastor Kruschel typed, “You can’t just tell them. You have to encourage...” Pastor Schallert replied,

I just mention the subject again and again in sermons. Your stronger members will be doing it with just that infrequent reminder, and the less strong ones will be more encouraged by a friendly encouragement in the sermon than being asked to be part of a program...

Finally, Pastor Zehms suggested nothing besides, “More encouragement and gospel preaching.”

This is not to say that the pastors had no “programs” they would gladly add to their congregations’ agendas. Pastor Engel would advertise through Val-Pak. That’s a secular company that regularly sends every house in the neighborhood a blue envelope full of coupons. Pastor Engel’s coupon would offer a free religious video. Then his members would deliver the videos in person. Pastor Huffman would incorporate more discussion into his adult education program. That way members would become “comfortable speaking God’s Word.” And it would become “part of their conversation and richer prayer life.” Another pastor plans to involve his members in cross-cultural ministry to the Latino migrant workers in his area. They will do interviewing and ESL classes. Again, two pastors emphasized the importance of the pastor’s example. The pastor can show that evangelism is exciting and it’s not just for whiz kids. And again, two pastors recommended witnessing brochures/invitations as a good way to get members involved in evangelism. That gives the member an excuse to share the Word: a tract to “get rid of.” Finally, my favorite “program” suggestion was another simple one from Pastor Eich,

“Remind them to slow their lives down so that they can take time with people – Look for moving signs in their neighborhood.”

Concerns the pastors have about this topic

Many want to know more about good methods

Five pastors expressed concern that they should know more about getting members involved in evangelism. Another pastor asked crucial questions:

How can we impress on God’s people that we don’t need to wait for the persecution (Acts 8:4) to get off our duffs and do outreach? How can we impress on our people that being born in a Christian home does not make a person a Christian if he/she is no longer hearing God’s Word or displaying any other evidence of faith? How can we encourage God’s people to speak what they know without fearing that they will make mistakes along the way?

Two pastors wanted to know more about helping prospects who move away, so that they get hooked up with the nearest WELS church in their new area. Another pastor wonders whether movers are usually looking for something or trying to get away from something. And he asks if that will affect how we approach those movers. There isn’t place here to answer all of these concerns, although some answers have been shared already above.

Some expressed concern for the Synod

A few pastors expressed concern that our Synod is wearing blinders when it comes to evangelism. They wondered if canvassing and other “programs” aren’t taking the focus off of the raw power of the gospel. Most any “program” in any area of church work can tempt us to lose focus in this way. And programs like “recent-mover programs” are only one small part of what doing evangelism is.

Pastor Hermann John said my paper should address how called workers that move a lot affect evangelism efforts. He gave some examples from his own congregation of the instability that results from this worker migration. I don’t have an answer for that concern.

Some expressed concern for me

Lastly, several men encouraged me when they took time to advise and warn me because I am a young man near Call Day. I will print two of those messages here:

Apache Missionary David Rosenau wrote, “Please take this in a kind way – Evangelism is doing whatever needs to be done to share the gospel with anyone and everyone. Here that means wearing jeans and a shirt all week, and then getting dressed up on Sunday: black jeans, shirt and tie, and yes, even a gown, unless I’m playing the guitar that day for lack of an organist. Live in the middle of those you serve, unless you are a foreign missionary as I am privileged to be. Then live better than they do, but work harder as well!”

And Calif. Pastor Michael Engel wrote, “I would like [your report] to focus on our reason for making the evangelism effort which is Christ’s command and our motivation which is God’s love in Christ. If we lose sight of these things we inevitably focus more on results which are often not forthcoming despite the effort. If we give up on the effort, figuring it’s not worth it, the Holy Spirit may go elsewhere for congregations to bless. And we will be the poorer for it.”

Both of these men gave me good reminders. May God protect us from the kind of poverty Rev. Engel mentioned!

Conclusion

We should not need another reminder that life is transient. Whether or not our prospects will soon move away, they could soon die. Either way it is urgent to extend the gospel buoy to all within our reach ASAP. This paper has gazed briefly on that tide called internal migration. God uses it to bring the drowning near our churches. May he make us ready to rescue many, many of them!

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Subject: You can help a WLS senior
Date: Fri, 31 Mar 2000 14:40:13 -0600
From: Christopher Doerr <doerrc@wls.wels.net>
Organization: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Dear Pastor,

My name is Christopher Doerr and I'm a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. I have an Evangelism paper due in April. My topic is "Evangelism in a Society that Moves a Lot."

As part of my research for that paper, I'm conducting an e-mail survey of 100 WELS pastors. You are one of those 100 pastors. Would you please take a few minutes within the next week to answer the following dozen or so questions? You can send your answers to my e-mail address, which is printed above. I appreciate your help. Thank you.

Questions about Statistics:

1. According to recent U.S. Census Bureau figures, 16% of Americans change addresses within a given year. Another source says that over a 5-yr. period almost 50% of the U.S. population will move to a new address. How would you estimate that your community measures up to these statistics? On what do you base your estimate?

2. The Census Bureau says that 1/3 of Americans ages 20-24 move in a given year. That's two times as great as the 16% figure in question 1. Does that seem accurate to you? Please explain why.

3. A 12/1999 article in the Dallas Business Journal estimates that 35 to 80 million older Americans will be moving from the city to the country within the next 20 yrs. The Census Bureau says that between 1990 and 1996, non-metro counties grew in population by 5.9%. A Gallup poll had a majority of Boomers saying they want to retire in "a small town or rural area." On the other hand, Newsweek of 4/12/1999 reported a study of 24 cities across the country, in which each of the cities is expecting growth in its downtown population.

What's your reaction to these city-country population figures?

Questions about Effects:

4. How does the high percentage of movers in America positively affect your congregation's evangelism efforts?

5. How does it negatively affect your congregation's evangelism efforts?

6. Which type of moving most affects your congregation's evangelism efforts?

-- people moving within the same area? people moving out of the area? or people moving into the area? Please explain your answer.

Questions about Efforts:

7. Does your congregation subscribe to some service that gives you addresses for people who move into a home in your area? If so, which service is it? And how do you like it?

8. Does your congregation have a program to find and reach out to new people in the area? If so, what is the program like?

Questions about Logistics:

9. In your congregation, who is responsible for finding/reaching new people in your area? How does that work out?

10. In your congregation, who is responsible for keeping track of prospects' current mailing addresses? How does that work out?

11. If you wanted to get the congregation more involved in reaching out to "new neighbors," how would you go about that?

Questions about Your Concerns:

12. If you were going to read my report, what questions (regarding my topic) would you most like it to address?

Again, thank you for your time during this busy season of the year!

Respectfully,
Christopher Doerr