

You better not shop around

By [Stan Wilson](#)

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Members of our church were studying the Hebrew word *shalom* one night when someone asked: "Where are the places in our community that seemed to be governed by fear, division, doubt and death?"

"That's easy," said another member. "It's happening in my neighborhood. We're afraid of the people who are moving here. I tried to get some of my old neighbors to make bread for a new neighbor, and they all refused. There was a day when we made bread for every new neighbor."

A long and important silence followed because we realized that our members had been among the first to move out of that neighborhood.

Our church began as a mission to these neighborhoods, but we've left them behind for newer houses, larger bathrooms and higher ceilings. Now a new wave of people of color is coming in, and there is tension and a need for a redemptive presence.

Finally someone said, "Maybe it's time for us to start moving back into the neighborhood."

Change one word in Jeremiah's charge, and it becomes a very real challenge for my congregation: "Seek the shalom of the *neighborhood* where I have sent you. . . . and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom."

In order to begin seeking the health, healing and prosperity of the neighborhoods or cities to which we are sent, we'll need to check a number of American tendencies. First, we'll need to check the tendency to shop around. Americans are notoriously eager to move on. We stay in a house for only a few years: how can we seek the peace of any place unless we are committed to it for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, over the long haul?

As a way of checking wanderlust, the “new monastics” have proposed that we consider the old vow of stability. Christians have been taking vows of stability at least since Benedict, but it’s a foreign practice for most of us. To practice stability is to stay put no matter how much something new beckons you or threatens you. The vow requires virtues of courage and hope, as well as the vision to see the “small postage stamp of soil” (to quote another Mississippian) which we have been given as the site where the reign of Christ is coming into being, even those sites that have been abandoned in our pursuit of American happiness.

At Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis, pastor Mike Bowling and the congregation have agreed that he’s not going to “get called” anywhere new until the congregation shares his calling. Members of the congregation are also making commitments to one another over the long haul, and to the well-being of their troubled neighborhood, by establishing a host of ministries that include community gardens, bee hives on the roof , and affordable housing units. Something’s happening. Ten years ago 75 percent of the congregation commuted to church on Sunday from outside the neighborhood. Today 75 percent of the congregation lives in the neighborhood. In the shalom of neighbors they once feared, they are discovering their own shalom.

I wonder if it is time for pastors to consider a call to vocational stability as one witness to the peace of Christ in a culture of ceaseless wandering and shopping. This is not to rule out itinerant ministry for some, but it would be a special vow: “In as much as it depends upon me, I am going to stay where I have been sent, and seek the shalom of this place over the long haul.”