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Learning to Live

BY STEPHEN ERICH

In some places, like those where I grew up, people ask one another where they live. In others, like parts of Benton Harbor, Michigan, they ask one another where they stay. Change is the norm in many low-income living arrangements, and may be one cause of this lexical shift; in the last year, one of my young friends at Harbor of Hope — a growing church-plant in Benton Harbor — has moved approximately four times and used three different phone numbers. This kind of movement seems excessive even for an unstable university student, but much more for someone still in high school. A life like this naturally could shape a language around the temporary instead of the permanent.

Noticing this shift from the permanent-sounding life to the more temporary stay has me questioning my future on a level beyond how many times I'll move. It represents two distinct kinds of life: one without responsibility beyond myself — an uninvested, short stay, and one tied to the well-being of those around me — a long-term life. I just graduated from Andrews University with a degree in international business, however, I started college with plans to travel and see the world.

Even though I've always said "live" to explain where I slept at night, I lacked any sense of responsibility for my community. I was excited to get out and be free.

The staying versus living perspective can be a sort of proxy for understanding community investment. As a student missionary, I met a friend from California who called Bangkok his home. He arrived after I did but, as soon as I met him, he already had begun to identify with the place. He told me that he never acted as if he would be somewhere temporarily. Like Jim Elliot writes, "Wherever you are, be all there!"¹ Wherever he was, that was home.

To talk, to claim a truth, without investing in the people around you is merely to stay — to be in a house but to remain detached — with a temporary mindset. But to *live* is to love sacrificially, to base one's own well-being on that of others. To tie one's fate into those around. This approach makes the new house a home from the very start.



Stephen Erich

What we believe is so extraordinary, and based so much on a future hope, that encouraging and supporting each other in this belief is one of the most important things we can do. Always praying, encouraging, singing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is vital as Christian community members. A church consists of the day-to-day dynamics of its members.

As time has gone on, I have become more invested in the Benton Harbor community, and it has become a place where I not only contribute, but I receive. And now, instead of planning to launch immediately into another country, I look for opportunities to live in Benton Harbor. It is becoming my community.

Once I discovered that difference in vocabulary several years ago, I started to replace "live" with "stay" when in the context of my church family at Harbor of Hope. Recently, however, I've started to notice myself using "stay" unintentionally, simply as my normal answer to that same old question, "Where do you live?" My lexicon has shifted. And maybe my attitude has changed in the opposite way. Maybe it takes living together to the point of being changed, to the point of learning to say something like "stay" to really learn how to live.

Stephen Erich graduated with a business degree from Andrews University in May 2014 and currently works as Mobile Farm Market coordinator at the Andrews Student Gardens.

1. *Leadership Resources*, retrieved from <http://www.leadershipresources.org/blog/christian-missionary-jim-elliott-quotes/> (May 9, 2014).