

Interview – Apartment Life – Christian Community

Stan Dobbs CEO

Tina Hansen VP of People

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AI: From the Best Christian Workplaces scores Apartment Life is at the top of the list in terms of creating Christian community. What does Christian community look like in the workplace, especially in your workplace?

Stan: The beauty of it is that Christian community has been defined for us in scripture. We have always looked to Acts chapter 2 as the definition of what God intended in terms of Christians living in community together whether it be the workplace, the church or wherever. And we've actually tried to model this in the service we provide as apartment owners. We've taken that Acts chapter 2 definition and formed the whole program, our CARES program, around that. In that scripture, it talks about Christians that were living in authentic relationships together. There was an intimacy. There was a connectedness. There was an overt expression of care on a day to day basis. They were doing life together. There was an authenticity to it. There was an expression of compassion and giving to others as we see they took up offerings for the struggling believers. They were very generous in how they spent their money.

We really look at that as the Biblical mandate on God's expression of what Christian community looks like. It's kind of our measuring stick of how well we are doing.

AI: So, Stan, you have a Director of People at Apartment Life, don't you?

Stan: Tina Hansen is our Vice President of People and she has been with us since day one. She was actually one of our first clients and we fell in love with her immediately. She felt called to leave that secular world and join us and she has been the architect of helping us create a work environment and model biblical community as a team that has shown itself in some of the survey results.

AI: So Tina, how do you know that you have a good Christian community? What are some of the signs? What are some of the elements that you have put into building Christian community at Apartment Life as an organization?

Tina: I think that is a great question, AI, because I had the opportunity to do this in the secular world and saw how successful it was there. That made it clear to our eyes that everybody is hungry for community. People just want to know that they are loved and cared for and that beyond what they can do for your organization that they matter.

What we've done at Apartment life is translate that into our culture and what that looks like for us as an organization. From the beginning we have put some nonnegotiables in place and one of those is our culture. We determined that number one we were going to be Christ-like in how we approached all of our relationships, whether it be with clients, vendors but most especially with each other. We want to have fun, which is diving back into one of our Core Principles. We believe that when we have fun together we can be family. We want to be a family. We want to include our staff's family in who we are because it is so much a part of who they are. We want family to be integrated because we want our staff to feel that they are all that God wants them to be and part of that is who they are outside of Apartment Life. We want them to feel that they have the opportunity to bring that

in with them. It's really a wholistic approach to helping them be balanced people in their work-life at Apartment Life, personal life and whatever else God has called them to. It really has translated into the most unique culture and a place where people have friends. I can honestly say that personally I work with my best friend. Having that allows me to be totally transparent, to be who I am. We want Apartment Life to be a safe place so that when I'm going through life, whatever the ups and downs of that may look like, I know that the people that I work with day in and day out are going to care for me. They are going to come around and they are going to celebrate with me in times when I can celebrate and they are going to come around me and minister to me when that's what I need. That really anchors people into their organization and we've really seen that in our tenure.

AI: Do you track your tenure? Do you know how it compares to industry standards?

Tina: That's a great question. We've never tracked it before, but I think we're at a size now where we are ready to start tracking that. I'm thinking that a good snapshot would be the people in our primary office, which we call our support center. Of the 10 people in that office, I'd say the average tenure is about 5 years and we've been around for 8 years. And the core group, Stan, myself, the director of administration, the director of operations, our controller, have probably all been here an average of 6-7 years. So, it really is a place and a culture that people don't want to leave. We really pour ourselves into that – it really does become a part of who we are.

Stan: Two things that Tina mentioned that are key are that a lot of forces in society want to compartmentalize your life – to have your family life, your work life, your church life, your play life – and we try to decompartmentalize your life. So work is just a natural facet of all of your life. As Tina said, we want you to bring all of your life to Apartment Life. We want to be whole integrated with your family and with issues you're struggling with in other dimensions. And I think that for many people that's a healthier way to live. You don't just move from box to box to box.

The other principle that is key is trying to instill in people that your worth at Apartment Life is not just your productivity. It's not just what you do for Apartment Life. Your work is intrinsic in who you are as a child of God and that manifests itself in how we treat each other and care for each other. Even when we have struggles and we have people who are under-performing, you address that in a Christ-like way as well. Where are you anchoring their worth and where are people perceive you are anchoring their worth is chief.

AI: Tina you mentioned some nonnegotiables and that means that you have clearly defined this. And people who are outside of these behaviors - of being Christ-like, bringing fun to work, operating as a family, having a wholesome, honest approach - they don't last at Apartment Life. Is that what you are saying?

Tina: That's exactly what I'm saying. One of the things we are working on currently is developing a model that we can apply against prospective employees so that we can identify those things prior to those people coming on board. We clearly try to communicate that up front. We are trying to define it to an even greater degree and develop some instruments that might identify some question marks before we hire somebody because it is very unique. People who don't embrace those particular tenants, they don't last at Apartment Life because it's very unique.

AI: How have you fostered this Christian community at Apartment Life. You have described to a degree what it is. How does it grow and maintain its health?

Stan: Again it comes back to your core beliefs about God creating the desire for community in the human heart. I believe it is our job to develop the environment and give people the freedom to know that it's ok to be that here. It happens naturally. It happens supernaturally. Tina and I would say that the role of senior leadership is to create

a work environment and to create forums that facilitate the formation of Christian community. But it's not something that we have to force because once people see that and feel that freedom, then I think the supernatural kicks in and they say, "this is how God hard-wired me to be. This is how God desires me to be. And this level of authenticity and intimate relationship is appropriate to bring into my relationship with my coworkers. What we've tried to do is create an environment where we say, "that's who we are. It's good." And then that manifests itself in things like e-mail culture, the work-space design and informal gatherings. Prayer helps, but I think. I think you need to create an environment and then natural forums for people to do what comes naturally.

Tina: I would concur with that. I think there is some intentionality on our part up front to make sure that we give opportunities for the culture to manifest itself and to grow and percolate. We do things, like Stan said, to make sure the work environment creates opportunities for that culture, like meetings and celebrations, that really hone in on people.

From a senior leadership perspective we try to model it where we are so that in other areas it will also take place and it finally does become ok. Being transparent is not a bad thing in the workplace. It's not only expected, it's encouraged so that we can connect with one another. Without transparency and authenticity you have surface-level relationships. With surface-level relationships you'll never have a vibrant community.

Al: It's interesting, I was just at a workshop put on by Seattle Pacific University, a Christian university, and they had large secular businesses attend, including one very large business here that makes airplanes. One of the key business leaders in that organization was saying, "You know, we create a culture where we cause people to only bring a part of themselves to work and we teach them exactly how to behave and then we realize that we are only dealing with partial people. They are not bringing themselves. They are not transparent. They are not authentic. They are just the political mask of what the organization wants them to be to stay out of trouble."

Stan: The buzz word now is emotional IQ. It's a secularization of what the spiritual principles are. Hiring purely on skills and background, the world is finding, is just a very small part of the world, and a very small piece of who we are as human beings. The world is waking up to that fact.

Al: Stan I've heard you talk about how you get everybody together regularly for team meetings. How does that work?

Stan: The highlight of it is our team retreat, where we bring the whole team together for a multi-day retreat that is certainly part of this. One of the questions was challenges to community and we've seen that as we grow and get more decentralized and you get more people dispersed geographically, then it certainly changes the dynamics and you've got to move to a decentralized community building approach. You almost have to basically replicate the culture into your regional leadership so that they can in turn develop that culture locally. They get "Tina-ized" when she comes in and sprinkles her dust on them. It's not just about the task, the function, but it's about growing together

Al: When you prepare for those annual retreats and those times when you get together, fun is a big part of the agenda isn't it?

Tina: Our motto is "Have fun or go home." We chose to do that because when having fun people relax. That's when you see the masks and the facades melt away. That's when you see people become who they really are. Then you have the opportunity to connect with them at a different level. When we started Apartment Life, it was really funny, our annual retreats were probably 70% business 30% fun and today we mirror that almost exactly opposite with 30% business and 70% fun. As Stan said, the more decentralized we get, the harder it becomes to

get together and model that community and pour into our entire organization. That retreat really gives us an opportunity to do that. So fun becomes a hallmark of that time together. It's not just fun, but it's out of the box fun. We have a lot of surprises. Surprises are a big deal. We don't tell Stan because he won't keep it a surprise. People really get excited about this time together and really begin to look forward, months in advance, to what this is. "What could it be this year?" We really have to work hard to outdo ourselves one year to the next, but that makes it fun too.

Stan: An example of what this outside of the box fun looks like is the time the leadership staff went sky-diving together. For some people it was defiantly outside of what they conceived of as reasonable possibilities, but we did it and we had a great time. We took the whole team on a helicopter tour over the Grand Canyon. Those serve as those markers that as a team you never forget. The picture that's on your desk is the whole team doing it together. It's those memorable experiences that are key to doing what we're trying to do.

Al: Stan, you were getting to our next question here, the hindrances to Christian Community and how you address those barriers. There's a force, even within Christian organizations, that is trying to break down Christian community.

Stan: I think Tina touched upon one of them a minute ago when she mentioned the kind of care we are putting into our hiring practices. We have to be more intentional about insuring that our culture is sustained. We've even developed a 360 degree instrument that scores a person on some of these softer, "What is your leadership style?", "What is your inner-personal style?" - things that something like a Right Path or some of the other more traditional instruments don't pick up on. We really go to the heart of it to find if you are really the kind of person who will fit within Apartment Life. So I think that is really the key as we grow to ensure that the culture is manifested in the leaders that we hire. But that's a challenge and when you've made a mistake, all of a sudden, that becomes really clear.

Then there are some personality types that may feel threatened at first, but it's just a matter of time for them to break down a lot of the walls that some have in the work environment, but that can be a hard leap. It goes back to making sure on the front end that there is a fit.

Tina: One of the reasons that my job exists today is a recognition that keeping our people at the forefront of the value equation at Apartment Life is so critical to protecting who we are, our culture and our community. I have things in my job description that are very intentional. Twice a year I personally call every employee to touch them, to see how they are doing. Not to talk about their job. Not to score them on their performance, but to really find out how they are. They are very intentional. Yes, these things are intuitive to me because they are so close to my heart. But as an organization we chose to clearly say, "These are so critical to who we are and our success, that we are going to put our money there. We are going to invest in our organization this way. We really work hard, I work hard on modeling our culture to everybody in a very practical, intentional way. And hopefully in spreading that to our leadership it can then be felt by everybody in our care teams that are serving in the field.

Al: That's fascinating. You see this model of people calling in a small group in a Bible study and how impactful that is on those individuals feeling connected with that small group. But to have it where you are calling twice a year as part of your job description is really interesting and, as you say, intentional. Thanks for sharing that.

Stan, I've got to say, as a CEO of an 8-year-old ministry that is growing like crazy, I'm sure that you have a tension on how much time and pressure you put on your people and how much you pour into your staff internally and how much you focus externally and trying to expand the kingdom in that sense. Tell me how you work with that.

Stan: I think it's all about a) surrounding yourself with good people, who are also b) complimentary people. I tend to be focused on task, strategic plan and getting the stuff done and as any leader you need to recognize where your soft spots and weakness are and fill those up with people who are great in those areas and I think Tina and my relationship is a great example of that. Tina and I are complementary. We understand each other's strengths. And I think with any organization, if you are going to continue to grow, with any group of leaders that have that diversity. That certainly was very evident with Apartment Life.

Tina: I think Stan often doesn't give himself enough credit. He has absolutely given the freedom for community even though it may not be his core strength. He has recognized that and given us the freedom to develop that and he nurtures that in our entire team even though that isn't always intuitive to him. He takes the time to invest in us as people. It makes a huge, huge impact on all of us.

Al: What are the rewards of developing this intentional Christian community? What have been the rewards for Apartment Life?

Stan: I think everyone wants to work at a place where they wake up in the mornings and say, "I can't wait to go to work. I can't wait to do what I get to do. I can't wait to fulfill the God-given passions within my heart." I want anyone who works for Apartment Life to feel that way. They should say, "I'm excited about what I do. I'm thankful for the people God has allowed me to work with." Those are rewards. We all want that. We want to work at a place where we are loved. We want to work at a place where we know we are making a difference for God. It's pretty simple.

Tina: It is simple. I've always said, "If you take care of the people, love the people and pour into the people, then the bottom line takes care of itself." I think that we are proving that. I think that the staff at Apartment Life is a prime example of that. Our tenure is high which means that our recruiting costs are down. Our training costs are down. What we get to invest in our training and what we get to pour into our people, we don't have to do that for new people all the time because we have great turnover, so we get to do that with our existing staff. The rewards there are personally great. Our growth in the market place and our ability to touch more in the market place apartment communities for Christ has grown exponentially because of that.

The rewards are not just for our employees. Just like Stan says, I personally wake up every day so excited about what I do. That just trickles down. Having employees who can get up and say that brings success to your organization.

Al: I've noticed over the years as I've been working with organizations that there are some Positive Cores in Christian Organizations. Stan, you touched upon it. People just intrinsically want to make a difference. They want to come to work and fulfill the dreams that God has put on their hearts and make that difference. The second thing is people want to come to a place where they are cared about and they are part of a community. That they can feel loved and accepted as people. And that's exactly what you described.