



Happily Employed: Fifth grade teacher Susan Walsvig (pictured with her students) loves her workplace because of the concern and flexibility her boss and coworkers showed in a trying time.

The 50 **BEST** Christian Places to **WORK**

The second annual survey highlights companies that focus on building a culture of trust.

by HELEN LEE

SUSAN WALSVIG, a fifth grade teacher at Mariners Christian School in Costa Mesa, California, had always enjoyed her job. But after a recent family tragedy, she gained even more appreciation for her workplace and colleagues.

Last December, her nephew was dying of brain cancer. She wanted to take time off but she did not have enough vacation days to do so. That's when the school's headmaster, Mary Letterman, went to see her. "You shouldn't be here," said Letterman. "Take the time you need so you will have no regrets, and go be with your family." The administration was not the only point of support for Walsvig; her coworkers helped carry her workload until her return.

The response of Mariners' leaders and employees reflects the attitude found in many of the top finalists of the second annual Best Christian Places to Work survey. Conducted by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute (BCWI), the survey polled more than 10,000 employees from 107 organizations in a variety of Christian industries (including this year's new additions: church-related organizations and businesses with a Christian mission that do not necessarily offer explicitly Christian products or services). But the workplaces that stood out were the ones that extended the boundaries of loving one's neighbor to include office colleagues. These organizations look more like Christian communities than Christian corporations, and their employees treat one another more like family than co-workers.

"We look out for every aspect of our employees' lives, beyond what is happening in their classes," says Letterman. "We work to create an atmosphere where we can care for our faculty and staff in practical ways."

When employees believe that their employers genuinely have their best professional and personal interests in mind, the employees are more likely to demonstrate that same concern for one another. As a result, Christian workers can develop strong bonds, both inside and outside the office. "If an e-mail goes out to the staff stating a place to go to lunch, almost all of our staff shows up. This shows how much our staff gets along, as well as the family atmosphere that our work provides," says

Daniel White, sponsorship manager at finalist Gospel Music Association.

“We seem to have a whole staff of people with the gift of encouragement and exhortation,” says Mariners music teacher Tricia Heins. “On any given day, I have at least two e-mails from fellow staff members asking me how my day is going and how they can lift me in prayer.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

The strength of Christian community is a barometer for how a Christian workplace is functioning. But even more significant is the relationship between managers and employees. This year’s survey demonstrates that the happiest Christian employees work in companies where their leaders strive to create a climate of trust.

“Successful leaders know that the quality of an organization’s ministry and the quality of internal trust are directly related,” says BCWI executive director Al Lopus. “When people trust one another, they are fully engaged in the ministry and good things happen. But when trust is never established or broken, relationships suffer and employees can become disengaged from their work, discouraged, or even fearful. As a result, employee satisfaction nosedives.”

In fact, the employees at companies that placed at the bottom of this year’s survey reported that their managers failed to show trust. Virgil Smith, professor of management at Biola University, believes that trust is a challenge for some Christian managers and leaders because “[they] are not willing to take a risk on the employees. But if we wait until the employee has all these abilities and maturity before we will trust them, we will never develop them.”

At the core, the decision of whether to have faith in employees may come down to a manager’s theological leanings regarding human nature, Smith says. “Is man a fallen creature who has no possibility of doing good, or is man made in the likeness of God, conformed to the image of Christ, and therefore in the process of becoming [more like] Christ? Many Christians have grown up thinking that total depravity means that people are [incapable of any

good]. And if we believe our workers are totally depraved, we won’t even give them a chance to show us otherwise.” Smith believes that this attitude results in a downward spiral: managers do not trust employees, employees take few risks and do only what is necessary in their jobs, and the managers thus believe their first instinct not to trust them was correct.

Of course, leaders from the top finalists of this year’s survey are not naïve and do not trust blindly. They seek to hire dependable and competent people.

Then they give them the latitude and freedom they need to demonstrate their trustworthiness. There are two types of trust involving employees—trust in their integrity and trust in their competence, says Bill Couchenour, president of finalist Cogun, a church design and construction company.

“If you’re talking about a trust in competency, or the ability to do a job, then a leader gives that trust incrementally as a person grows into their potential,” he says. “But if you’re talking about a trust in integrity, a leader must trust from the beginning.” Several leaders of top finalists who cultivate trust among their employees admit that there have been occasions when their trust has been violated, but their attitudes have not changed on this issue. Couchenour believes that “the benefits far outweigh the dangers. I’ve been surprised in a positive sense many more times than I’ve been disappointed.”

One such rewarding instance occurred when Tim Cool, a district manager at Cogun, and his wife had triplets in 1996. His job typically had him on the road two or three nights a week, but once his children were born, the company gave him the freedom to arrange his schedule in whatever way he needed to best suit his family life, in addition to

providing him with a laptop computer to work from home.

“Everyone was supportive,” Cool says. “This type of concern for a team member’s personal life and family has been echoed many times and in many ways by Cogun.” Couchenour says, “We had confidence in [Cool], and he responded in a positive way. Most leaders fall into one of two camps. Either they believe people must be watched every minute so they don’t take advantage of you, or they believe people will rise to the level of trust they have been given. I believe we are all, truly, created in God’s image. Because of that fact, I believe that our normal state is to desire what is good and what is best.”

Missy Zahn, an executive assistant at Gospel Music Association, wanted to find some way that the Christian music industry could support U.S. troops stationed overseas. Her supervisor, GMA president John Styll, affirmed her idea to ask record companies to donate music for the troops, and let her take the lead in executing it. This resulted in shipments

On-site daycare can increase employee satisfaction: 12 percent of the finalists offer daycare service, compared with only 2 percent of the non-finalists.

How They Were Chosen

The process began by soliciting self-nominations from interested organizations that had more than 15 employees and a Christian mission. A high percentage of employees in these organizations were asked to fill out an online survey composed of 66 questions that covered their company’s people practices; organizational leaders separately provided detailed profiles of their human resource practices.

An independent panel of judges weighed together the averages from the employee scores, the participation rates of every organization’s employees in the survey, and information from the management profiles in order to select this year’s list of The Best Christian Places to Work. The judges were not told the organizations’ identities in order to ensure an unbiased result.

- THIS YEAR’S PANEL OF JUDGES:**
- Olan Hendrix**
CEO of the Leadership Resource Group
 - John Pearson**
President and CEO of the Christian Management Association
 - Kent Humphreys**
President of Christ@Work



Group Hug: John Howard (center), head of Howard Publishing (which puts out the successful Hugs series), gets into a huddle with his employees every morning. The meeting ends with prayer and, of course, a group hug.

of several thousand CDs.

“It was the most rewarding project I’ve had the chance to be a part of,” Zahn says. “We are not limited by our job description. When a company believes in their employees and gives them ownership over their work, that’s when you start to see people come alive.”

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

When workplaces possess a strong community and an atmosphere of trust, their employees are more inclined to accept the material sacrifices that often come with working for Christian non-profits (which constitute a large number of this year’s survey participants). But even so, issues of compensation weighed more heavily on the minds of survey respondents this year, in part due to the combination of a sluggish economy and rising health care costs.

The happiest Christian employees work at private Christian schools.

This year’s finalists took a variety of approaches to handle compensation dilemmas, but the common thread was a concern for how to treat their people. Lawrence Swicegood, director of communications at finalist Fellowship Church, says, “Fellowship Church pays its employees market rate or close to it. We don’t want our employees

to have to have three jobs on the side. The mentality in ministry is, ‘if you’re in ministry, you should work for less.’ But you can get so much more out of an employee if you pay them what they’re worth. That’s why we have 25 to 30 percent fewer employees than other churches our size.”

Often, Christian organizations are not able to provide materially for their employees to the extent that they would like. But those characterized by community and trust are better able to weather the economic and financial challenges. In 2002, repeat top finalist Medical Ambassadors International (MAI) faced losing 25 percent of its annual budget due to a business downturn of its largest donor. The administration shared this information

CHRISTIANITY TODAY SALUTES FINALISTS in twelve categories

HIGHER EDUCATION (MORE THAN 300 EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Whitworth College** • Spokane, Washington
- 2 **Seattle Pacific University** • Seattle, Washington
- 3 **Cedarville University** • Cedarville, Ohio
- 4 **Roberts Wesleyan College** • Rochester, New York

HIGHER EDUCATION (151 THROUGH 300 EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Dallas Theological Seminary** • Dallas, Texas
- 2 **Belhaven College** • Jackson, Massachusetts
- 3 **Huntington College** • Huntington, Indiana
- 4 **The Master’s College** • Santa Clarita, California
- 5 **Westmont College** • Santa Barbara, California
- (tie) **Simpson College** • Redding, California

HIGHER EDUCATION (150 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Phoenix Seminary** • Scottsdale, Arizona
- 2 **The Master’s Seminary** • Santa Clarita, California
- 3 **Bethel Seminary San Diego** • San Diego, California
- 4 **Assemblies of God Theological Seminary** • Springfield, Missouri
- 5 **Bryan College** • Dayton, Tennessee

CHURCH-RELATED ORGANIZATIONS

- 1 **Fellowship Church** • Grapevine, Texas
- 2 **New Life Church** • Colorado Springs, Colorado
- 3 **The Christian and Missionary Alliance (HQ)** • Colorado Springs, Colorado

MEDIA

- 1 **Howard Publishing** • West Monroe, Louisiana
- 2 **InterVarsity Press** • Westmont, Illinois
- 3 **EMF Broadcasting** • Rocklin, California
- 4 **Daystar Television Network** • Dallas, Texas

PARACHURCH AND MISSIONS (MORE THAN 100 EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Coalition for Christian Outreach** • Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- 2 **SIM USA** • Charlotte, North Carolina
- 3 **Denver Rescue Mission** • Denver, Colorado
- 4 **CityTeam Ministries** • San Jose, California

PARACHURCH AND MISSIONS (31 THROUGH 100 EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Medical Ambassadors International** • Modesto, California
- 2 **New Mission Systems International** • Fort Myers, Florida
- 3 **The Friends of Israel** • Bellmawr, New Jersey
- 4 **Pioneers** • Orlando, Florida
- 5 **MOPS International** • Denver, Colorado

PARACHURCH AND MISSIONS (30 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Apartment Life** • Euless, Texas
- 2 **Team Expansion** • Louisville, Kentucky
- 3 **Peacemaker Ministries** • Billings, Montana
- (tie) **Pioneer Clubs** • Wheaton, Illinois
- 4 **Ravi Zacharias International Ministries** • Norcross, Georgia

PRIVATE SCHOOLS, K-12 (MORE THAN 75 EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Desert Christian Schools** • Lancaster, California
- 2 **SBEC School** • Southaven, Massachusetts
- 3 **Evangelical Christian School** • Cordova, Tennessee

PRIVATE SCHOOLS, K-12 (75 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Mariners Christian School** • Costa Mesa, California
- 2 **Calvary Christian High School** • Clearwater, Florida
- 3 **Wheaton Academy** • West Chicago, Illinois

PRODUCTS AND SERVICES (MORE THAN 50 EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Cogun** • North Lima, Ohio
- 2 **EMI Christian Music Group** • Brentwood, Tennessee
- 3 **Association of Christian Schools International** • Colorado Springs, Colorado
- 4 **Shepherds Ministries** • Union Grove, Wisconsin


PRODUCTS AND SERVICES (50 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Gospel Music Association** • Nashville, Tennessee
- 2 **DeMoss Group** • Duluth, Georgia
- 3 **Council for Christian Colleges and Universities** • Washington, D.C.
- 4 **Pura Vida Coffee** • Seattle, Washington

The number of finalists in each category is proportionate to the number of participants.

with the staff, and the company devoted itself to prayer about the shortfall. Instead of receiving a miraculous replacement in funding, they received another answer to prayer: to continue to grow, trust God for the funds, and sacrifice personally in the areas of compensation and benefits. By the end of 2003, MAI had actually exceeded its budget. "The willingness of staff to sacrifice their material welfare to keep the field growing was a reflection of how staff had bought into the vision," says Paul Calhoun, MAI executive director.

Although the administration feared that the situation would result in a loss of morale, what happened was just the opposite: the employees came together, shared what they had, and became an even stronger community due to their mutual dependence and faith in God.

In the end, it is this humble attitude of reliance on God that guides the leaders of the Best Christian Places to Work. They have faith that God has provided them with competent and trustworthy employees and treat them accordingly. It is reminiscent of the attitude of a certain Christian leader who sent his disciples out into the world and prayerfully entrusted them to do his work. Would Jesus approve of the way our finalists are trying to emulate his model? We believe so. 

Helen Lee is associate director of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute.

Employees between 30 and 44 years of age are least satisfied, while those over 65 are most satisfied.

Too Much Information?

One of the common characteristics of the top finalists in this year's Best Christian Places to Work survey is a commitment to open communication. But in an era of information hyperload, the challenge for today's workplaces is how to balance the desire to share without overdoing it.

Last year, repeat finalist Whitworth College was making difficult decisions regarding the adjustment of premiums and benefits in their health care plans—a common dilemma for Christian organizations in an era of rapidly escalating health care costs. The administration decided to share all the options with their employees, held hearings to answer questions, and asked employees to make their preferences known.

"Because employees were aware of all of the factors that went into the decision on health care benefits and premiums, they understood and supported the final decision," says Whitworth director of communications Greg Orwig.

Whitworth president Bill Robinson is a strong advocate for transparency. He says, "The gateway to trust is openness and communication. Why not open all the budgets to all who wish to see them? Why not review salaries with a representative com-

mittee of employees? Why not make expense reports available to those who want to see them?"

In a similar situation to Whitworth's, finalist Medical Ambassadors International (MAI) wanted to keep employees updated on changes in its insurance coverages. Laura Nelson, MAI's director of administration, shared the information four months before the changes were to take place. Doing so, however, caused some unnecessary unrest within the organization; as it turned out, the changes ultimately had a positive impact on their employees' expenses. "The ruckus that was raised was unnecessary and the concern it placed on staff unneeded. Now I'm rethinking the wisdom of when to release new information," Nelson says.

Robinson acknowledges that there is such a thing as too much openness, but he thinks that, on balance, Christian organizations err on the side of too little rather than too much. "The disclosure of some information can create more of a distraction than a benefit," he says. "But if you poll the workers in Christian or secular organizations on whether their leaders are too open or too closed, you'll find that people want to be kept informed, particularly about information that affects their decision-making."

A CLOSER LOOK at the TOP FINALISTS

| | Revenues 2002 (M) | Revenues 2003 (est.) | Full-time Employees | Voluntary Turnover | Vacation Days (5 yrs. of Service) | Training as % of Payroll |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Apartment Life | \$2.9 | \$4.8 | 26 | 15% | 15 | 3-4% |
| Coalition for Christian Outreach | \$5.6 | \$5.5 | 143 | 11% | 20 | 6% |
| Cogun | \$17.2 | \$25.0 | 63 | 2% | 15 | 3-4% |
| Dallas Theological Seminary | \$20.2 | \$21.4 | 248 | 1% | 15-20 | 1-2% |
| Desert Christian Schools | \$7.7 | \$7.9 | 95 | 17% | 15-20 | 1-2% |
| Fellowship Church | *** | *** | 165 | 3% | 15 | n/a |
| Gospel Music Association | \$3.0 | \$3.5 | 17 | 0% | 15 | <1% |
| Howard Publishing | \$9.7 | \$10.0 | 34 | 3% | 12 | <1% |
| Mariners Christian School | \$3.8 | \$4.4 | 71 | 4% | n/a | 1-2% |
| Medical Ambassadors International | \$2.1 | \$4.4 | 41 | 0% | 10 | <1% |
| Phoenix Seminary | *** | *** | 27 | 4% | 20 | 2% |
| Whitworth College | \$33.7 | \$35.8 | 350 | 8% | 15 | 3-4% |

*** Workplace has a policy of not disclosing its total revenues