

The 40 BEST Christian Places to WORK

How the winners of the third annual survey earned their employees' loyalty.

by AGNIESZKA TENNANT

THE MOST loved employers do unto their employees as they would have them do unto themselves. At least they try. That's one thing the 2005 Best Christian Places to Work survey suggests.

The finalists see their employees as so much more than brains or muscles they can use. They see them as parents who need flex time, as bodies that need exercise, as souls who need prayer, and as the sick who need compassion *and* good insurance.

Zondervan, top finalist in the large media category, showed extraordinary forbearance in the way it treated Jen Abbas, who was hired as associate marketing director in October 2003. Shortly after that, on January 21, 2004, Abbas fell and suffered a "mild traumatic brain injury." She became a walking wounded. "I looked fine, but my brain was bruised," she says. She lost the ability to be introspective and the concept of time. For most of last year, her short-term memory was gone. She had 157 doctor appointments in 2004.

But she told herself she was fine, and came in to work. In June, after a period of pushing too hard, she relapsed. Neurological tests found she was using 17 percent of her brain's functioning level. After several months of spotty attendance, doctors told her to stay home, this time for three months.

Abbas's two vice presidents—head of human resources Nancy Thole and VP of marketing John Topliff—"spent a lot of time with my speech therapist to find out what happens when you have a head injury," she says. "They wanted to structure my return to set me up to succeed. I'm blown away by that. So many people with head injuries lose their job or insurance." Instead, Abbas says, "I was told, 'Don't worry about the job, it's here for you.'"

The survey also showed that this year's winning workplaces "engage employees in decisions that affect them," says Best Christian Workplaces Institute executive director Al Lopus. A key sign of well-managed companies is that "they seek their employees' opinions" and, just as important, "act on them."

Three-time finalist Coalition for Christian Outreach never rested on its laurels. The first survey (which they won in their category) showed something that surprised the head of this parachurch organization. While the employees clearly loved their



Humane Relations: What do employees of DeMoss Group, a public-relations firm whose clients include Habitat for Humanity and Women of Faith, rave the most about? They love the freedom to occasionally work from home or while traveling for personal reasons. They also get a four-week sabbatical after five years of work and five weeks after ten years.

ROBIN NELSON

The 2005 Survey Winners

PRODUCTS AND SERVICES (90 OR MORE EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Alliance Defense Fund** • Scottsdale, Arizona
- 2 **Evangelical Christian Credit Union** • Brea, California

PRODUCTS AND SERVICES (89 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **DeMoss Group, Inc.** • Duluth, Georgia
- 2 **MPower Systems** • Plano, Texas
- 3 **Christianity.com (now Silas Partners)** • Alexandria, Virginia
- 4 **Partners International** • Spokane, Washington

HIGHER EDUCATION (300 OR MORE EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Bethel University** • Saint Paul, Minnesota
- 2 **Cedarville University** • Cedarville, Ohio
- 3 **Olivet Nazarene University** • Bourbonnais, Illinois
- 4 **Columbia International University** • Columbia, South Carolina

HIGHER EDUCATION (150 THROUGH 299 EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Evangel University** • Springfield, Missouri
- 2 **California Baptist University** • Riverside, California
- 3 **The Master's College** • Santa Clarita, California

HIGHER EDUCATION (149 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Phoenix Seminary** • Scottsdale, Arizona
- 2 **The Master's Seminary** • Sun Valley, California

PRIVATE SCHOOLS, K-12 (70 AND MORE EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Evangelical Christian School** • Cordova, Tennessee
- 1 **Scottsdale Christian Academy** • Phoenix, Arizona
- 2 **Briarcrest Christian School System** • Memphis, Tennessee
- 3 **Fredericksburg Christian Schools** • Fredericksburg, Virginia
- 4 **Indian Rocks Christian Schools** • Largo, Florida
- 5 **Friends Christian School** • Yorba Linda, California

PRIVATE SCHOOLS, K-12 (69 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Stoneybrooke Christian Schools** • San Juan Capistrano, California
- 2 **Desert Christian Schools** • Tucson, Arizona
- 3 **Wheaton Academy** • West Chicago, Illinois
- 4 **Covenant Life School** • Gaithersburg, Maryland

MEDIA (150 OR MORE EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Zondervan** • Grand Rapids, Michigan

MEDIA (149 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Howard Publishing, Inc.** • West Monroe, Louisiana
- 2 **Xulon Press, Inc.** • Fairfax, Virginia
- 3 **InterVarsity Press** • Downers Grove, Illinois

CHURCHES, PARACHURCHES, AND MISSIONS (120 OR MORE EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Coalition for Christian Outreach** • Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- 2 **Kensington Community Church** • Troy, Michigan
- 3 **Church Resource Ministries** • Anaheim, California

CHURCHES, PARACHURCHES, AND MISSIONS (50 THROUGH 119 EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Medical Ambassadors International** • Modesto, California
- 2 **Christian Cultural Center** • Brooklyn, New York
- 3 **Pioneers** • Orlando, Florida
- 4 **CityTeam Ministries** • San Jose, California

CHURCHES, PARACHURCHES, AND MISSIONS (49 OR FEWER EMPLOYEES)

- 1 **Apartment Life** • Euless, Texas
- 2 **New Mission Systems International** • Fort Myers, Florida
- 3 **Church Extension Plan** • Salem, Oregon
- 4 **Amor Ministries** • San Diego, California

jobs, “we had a lousy pension plan,” says CCO president Daniel J. Dupee. “Most of our people are in their 20s, so the deferred compensation plan never rose to the top of our concerns.” CCO has since not only rolled out an impressive pension plan, but also begun growing in its geographical reach and in number of employees after giving its workers the ownership of its goals.

COACHES WANTED

The survey also revealed the Achilles’ heel of many Christian workplaces: inadequate feedback and rewarding of good performance. “There are many Christian workers who have not received direct feedback on their performance in years,” Lopus says. “So they’re anxious to know how they can be more effective. Often, managers put on their Christian face of being positive, but they aren’t helpful if they do not coach employees toward improvement.”

In Jesus’ parable of the talents, the master gave different amounts to different people. The servants who doubled his investment were given more, but the servant who buried his talent was treated harshly. In the same way, Lopus says, Christian companies shouldn’t shy away from giving different rewards to workers who perform at different levels, “rewarding good performers and coaching others to improve poor performance.”

The good news is that the employees polled in the third annual survey report higher-than-before satisfaction with opportunities to learn and grow. “Clearly,” Lopus says, “these employees are taking the Scripture to heart that they consider it all joy when they encounter various trials.”

Agnieszka Tennant is an associate editor of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.

Choosing the Finalists

Contrary to some readers’ impressions, CHRISTIANITY TODAY staff—as versatile as we may be—do not actually conduct the survey. Best Christian Workplaces Institute, a human-resources consulting firm, does.

After the institute solicited self-nominations from Christian workplaces, employees in each organization filled out a confidential online survey. Administrators provided details of human-resources practices from workplaces that have a Christian mission statement.

To avoid the unfairness that goes with, say, comparing an 18-employee public-relations firm with an 80-employee nonprofit, the participants were broken up into 11 categories. The survey polled more than 8,403 employees from 84 organizations. After independent judges weighed the data in a “blind” process, the list of 40 emerged. (The names of the nonfinalists are confidential.) Because some categories were larger than others, the list names the number of finalists proportionate to the size of each group.

The panel of judges included Olan Hendrix, CEO, Leadership Resource Group; John Pearson, CEO, Christian Management Association; Ken Smitherman, CEO, Association of Christian Schools International; and Helen Lee, who approached CHRISTIANITY TODAY several years ago with the idea of conducting the survey and later cofounded the Best Christian Workplaces Institute.