

**Starting and Strengthening Congregations**

**David Hickman and Andrea Morris, Speakers**

**The Columbia Metro Connection Podcast 006**

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Chris Reinolds: Welcome to the Columbia Metro Connection, a podcast where you can go to get valuable, relevant, and quality resources for you and your congregation. The Columbia Metro Connection is sponsored and supported by the Columbia Metro Baptist Association, the almost 100 partner churches that support the ministry of the CMBA. This week's episode features Dave and Andrea with Apartment Life. Apartment Life is a faith-based nonprofit organization that has been serving the apartment industry since 2000. They believe every individual is created for community, and that we are all called to love our neighbors as ourselves. Their goal is to live this out while providing strong business values to apartment owners. They help apartment owners care for residents by connecting them in relationships, and this in turn helps improve the community's financial performance through online reputation, resident satisfaction, and resident retention. At Apartment Life, they are changing how the apartment business is done and changing the lives of those who live there.

Chris Reinolds: First of all, I want to welcome you Dave and Andrea to the podcast.

David Hickman: Hello, good to be here.

Andrea Morris: Hey.

Chris Reinolds: Now this is something that has actually been a process that's incredibly intriguing to me because you are approaching businesses with the intent to increase their profits, and they're opening the door wide open essentially for the churches to come in and building community.

David Hickman: Yeah, no, that's right yeah. No, since 2000, when this thing started with Stan Dobbs in Euless, Texas, that was the light bulb that went on for him. He was doing events on a multi-family property near his church, and the manager comes up and says, "Wow, retention has really gone through the roof. The culture here has really increased for the better." Stan thought, "Golly, this could be a really great resident retention service for apartments." He struck while it was hot, and as we know apartments are going up everywhere today. It's not hard to look around and see that. Apartments are wanting to differentiate themselves in terms of their amenities and what they offer. After many studies, it's funny, the apartment community is coming around to realize what the church has always known, is that community matters. Community matters. They're trying to figure out ways to build community on their properties. They're not sure how to do that, and so they're turning to Apartment Life to do that.

Chris Reinolds: Andrea, what really brings you into this? I know that you actually did this for a little while, you were serving on a team, and now you're sort of an administrator of the process. Specifically what are you doing and have done through the process of everything?

Andrea Morris: Yeah, so my husband and I were a team for about four and a half years. Through that, when we first went into it, we didn't really know. Does this really work? Is this really a business? Can it be a ministry? About a year and a half in we were like, "Wow, it does work." From then on my heart was just to eventually be on staff and to be able to work alongside these teams and help train them. My job for Columbia, Charleston, and Greenville is to really train our teams, equip them, and put them on communities that they're able to go and make disciples. Then from the business aspect, I'm the one that's the liaison with the clients and work with them too.

George Bullard: Show me the ministry. Kind of like show me the beef. Where is the church ministry involved in Apartment Life?

David Hickman: Yeah, no, in coordination with the churches we do work with teams in A.) helping to equip and train them in urban missions. Sometimes taking the gospel next door can be just as difficult as taking it across the ocean. We are training them on evangelism, and their own personal evangelism style, what that looks like, how that interacts with our post-Christian society today. We're doing training along with the church in that regard. Also, helping teams understand how to minister in light of fair housing regulations, which is a reality that anybody doing apartment ministry has to be aware of. Then finally where is the ministry, well we hold teams accountable. They're just not frolicking around the apartment and bathing in the saltwater pool ... or not bathing there. They wouldn't ... that's an old word.

Chris Reinolds: I hope not.

David Hickman: 2,000 years ago you went and bathed in the pool, right? But no, but they're actually being held accountable. We hold them accountable to several people impact, is what we call it. Just sharing your faith, inviting people to church, and at least entering into some type of spiritual conversation with the residents. There are measureables that we hold teams accountable to.

Chris Reinolds: As far as the percentage of people that are living in apartments in metro areas, what does that look like as far as those numbers go?

David Hickman: Well, so 50% of people, this is what you're asking?

Chris Reinolds: Yes, that is what I'm asking.

David Hickman: Yep, so 50% of people who are living in and around these growing metro areas like a Columbia, or a Charlotte, or a Greensboro, over half are now living in some form of multi-family housing. When I say that to a group of pastors oftentimes, eyebrows kind of go up because we realize as a church we talk a lot about reaching our city for Christ. You cannot reach Columbia for Christ unless we have some sort of idea, strategy, plan, whatever of how to really love and have a faithful presence on apartment communities. We're an option, we're not the option. But less than 5% of people that live in apartments are actually active in a local church.

Chris Reinolds: Wow.

George Bullard: That is amazing.

David Hickman: That's a big one.

George Bullard: I remember years ago I used to hear that it was one out of 10, but you say it's-

David Hickman: Less than 5% now.

George Bullard: So it's one out of 20, or one out of 25 or something like that now.

David Hickman: That's right. Again, we live in a different time. We absolutely do in 2018. I had a seminary professor talk about how in the 1950s and '60s on a scale of one to 10 if 10 was a fully committed follower of Christ, most people walked around at about a seven and all they needed was a knock on the door or a home visit to get them back. Now people are starting in the negative.

Chris Reinolds: Yeah.

David Hickman: It's not just a simple invitation to church. Now, they're starting in the negative. We have to overcome a lot of different things in terms of perception of Christians, and the way non-Christians can view Christians, so all that to say we have a lot of work to do.

George Bullard: Andrea, let me ask you about following up on that since you recently have been in as a cares team, you and your husband. I would agree with what Dave's saying, that people start with kind of a basic spirituality concept, or, "Do I need a spiritual aspect in my life?" Talk to me about when you're actually in an apartment complex dealing with people and cultivating a conversation with them over a period of time, how long it tends to take, and what kinds of issues you're able to address with them that might light them up just a little bit.

Andrea Morris: Yeah, it definitely is a process and it's something that we encourage our teams to have those spiritual conversations every month. Whether it's a simple starting conversation as, "Hey, do you have plans for Easter?" Then kind of see what their background is in that. Do they go to church? That just provides other conversations that leads to, "Hey, well we're going to church over here. Do you want to come with us?" For us, we would always host a Easter dinner at our apartment. We would just invite people whether they went to church or not to come over, just to establish a relationship. That relationship for us, we really didn't see any fruit from those simple conversations until that relationship really got a little bit deeper, and at least six to eight months in. Mainly because people are so closed off. As Dave said, they're kind of in the negatives, but they want to know your heart and your intentions behind it. They just want to see that you care about them as people.

 One of the things when we were a cares team is we would have people call us. We were the first people they called when they got a flat tire, or if they needed help with groceries. There was an elderly woman who had hip surgery and she called BJ every Thursday to come take her groceries to her apartment.

Chris Reinolds: That's good though.

Andrea Morris: But then eventually that led to deeper conversations to where we were able to say, "Hey, can we pick you up? Can we take you to church? Can we share the gospel with you?" It just took months of serving her and loving her intentionally. That's with all the residents, until they form that trust and that bond with you and you're able to just really share the good news with them.

George Bullard: I even heard this story, something about your children involved in ministry. There was some kind of bear that was involved too.

Andrea Morris: Yes. My son, 10 and a half pound Bear, I had him when we were a cares team, after being team for a little over a year. He grew up being a cares team with us. He would go on visits with us. He would come to some of the events. He was a bear, so he attacked the food display a lot. But, it was a way for us to intentionally engage him in the way that we chose to live our lives, just in loving our neighbor and teaching him what that looks like. Still to this day, I was telling Chris earlier, now that we've bought a house, we miss being a cares team. We'll do stuff on our cul-de-sac. We'll have all of our neighbors come out on our cul-de-sac because we still want them to see the value of just loving your neighbor. There's stories of people just on our road that we've been able to have those relationships with because of what we learned from being a cares team. So yes, Bear, he was definitely our fun addition to being a team. He loved meeting residents too.

George Bullard: Great.

Chris Reinolds: One of the things that it's interesting to me, hearing you guys talk about this and this particular ministry is there's a lot of carryover. It's not just for apartments, but as you said you're using this even in the housing area that you live in right now. You're essentially missionaries in the community where it is that God has placed you, or where it is that you are living. You're going in there and you're seeking to affect the culture by building personal relationships with people and you're affecting their personal beliefs because of your connections with them, their own theology, and even their ideology just because you're changing the culture that is existing in the environment in which they live.

David Hickman: Why does that strike us as odd? I'm not saying it's striking you, or George, or us in this room as odd, but for a listener who's going, "Man, yes that's it." Why does that strike us as odd? What we're doing and what we've been doing with Apartment Life and what you just so eloquently stated for 18 years is what we're called to do.

Chris Reinolds: Yeah, the book of Acts, it's clear.

David Hickman: What Apartment Life just provides really is a sense of intentionality and structure to that. There's a lot of churches out there right now that's using our model in neighborhoods with families, and they're calling it Neighborhood Life. We celebrate it. We're like, "Yes, that's it." But again, it's not rocket science. What we've been doing is very simple. It's difficult because we're trying to execute it in closed mission fields. These places are gated, fob protected, you can't get on. That's what makes Apartment Life unique.

Chris Reinolds: I guess my question would be, our podcast listener base is really going to be pastors and church leaders. What is the church's role in this type of ministry?

David Hickman: Well, number one recruiting, helping recruit teams. You can go to [Apartmentlife.org](http://www.apartmentlife.org), Apartment Life, L-I-F-E .org and you can read up on the program. You can send that link to maybe that couple in your church, could be a retiree couple, could be a young married couple with no kids, young married couple with kids that you just feel like, "Gosh, if they could get a taste of mission, they may not go to Haiti but man oh man if we could get them to apply it and be a cares team, and get a taste of mission they might give their life to it." I would say brainstorming, helping recruit teams. You can contact Andrea here. Andrea, you can maybe provide them with your email.

Chris Reinolds: We'll put that in the show notes and everything like that that we can contact you directly.

David Hickman: What would be another way, Andrea?

Andrea Morris: Yeah, another way is to help our team. Once you give us that team, we want to take care of them and steward them well. Whether it's having a small group or a Sunday School class come to an event and volunteer, whether it's at a property that may not have tables or chairs, you're able to provide that. There's so many different ways. Obviously we covet your prayers for that team, and the conversations that they're having. There's many different ways that we want the church to be involved. It really just is up to the church and how much they want to be.

Chris Reinolds: What if a church isn't the one that provides the care team? Can they also participate, or is it just exclusive to the care team's home church?

Andrea Morris: No, it's any church. We have plenty of properties where we have a team that may go to a church five miles down the road, but yet there's a church that's walking distance from it. So they partner with that cares team and they say, "Look we want to champion you, and we want to support you in any way," and so they come to the events, or they send resources. They're able to bring volunteers. The cares team, their ultimate goal is to get them connected to a local church and for the residents to hear the gospel, and so it doesn't matter what church they're going to as long as they can point them to a Bible-believing church. That's the goal is that even if a church can't provide us a team, we can still get churches involved and be on mission with us through these communities.

Chris Reinolds: Great.

David Hickman: And something else too, and there's such a wonderful spirit of collaboration I sense here in Columbia among pastors.

Chris Reinolds: Absolutely.

Andrea Morris: Yeah.

David Hickman: I know George is a big part of helping nurture and facilitate that, so hats off. Thank you for what you're doing.

George Bullard: Glad to do it.

David Hickman: Yeah, well I know you are. You're great at it, called to it. The more churches collaborate and move together and communicate, the more opportunities that we'll have for very effective collaborative ministry. These apartments are the largest and most unreached mission field in Columbia. It's not going to take just one church. It's going to take many churches coming around that property, loving the snot out of those people, and serving those management companies, and those on staff, and really just having a faithful presence there. I think that's such an important word and phrase in terms of what we do.

George Bullard: Well, I think it is too. I'm trying to put together a profile in my own mind about, shall we say a super supportive church, or a sponsoring church and that kind of thing, who might even commission the cares team as missionaries. I know a little of this might be redundant but if you were to name four or five key characteristics of a great church sponsoring a cares team ministry for Apartment Life, what would be some of those characteristics?

Andrea Morris: Yeah, I say one that's always recruiting, always sending us, because we always have properties coming available. We have three open in Columbia right now, so we want teams. We want a church that is going to support them through prayer first. They're going to be the main ones that if the team needs ... and they're like "Look, we have a single mom who really needs clothes for their kids. Can you please pray that the Lord provide?" We want people that are going to be their support team and pray for them. We want volunteers. We want them to be able to send volunteers, and send tables and chairs, and resources to help them. And then a church that's just present and they know what's going on. They know and can support them because it's not easy constantly living in an environment where people are like, "Hey, you're different. Why are you different?" They're always present and active in their community. They need some people that are behind them and pouring into them, and know just really that they're supported in that whole time that they're a cares team.

David Hickman: That's very well said. I wouldn't add anything maybe except just as visual. Growing up in this little Baptist church in east Tennessee there was a corkboard with a map of the world on it. There was a Polaroid picture of a couple in Haiti that was on there with a thumbtack all over this thing, celebrating all these missionaries that we had all over the globe. For me, when I think of the perfect church partner, it's someone that's got a map of their neighborhood, or a map of their city. They've got the Polaroid picture, so to speak, of all the cares teams they've got serving in all of these little villages, as Ronny Cox would say, and praying for them and supporting them. The more we do that in Columbia, the more effective we'll be able to reach Columbia for Christ.

George Bullard: Well, that goes to the fact that ... if I understand right, it's part of Andrea's work, it may be a part of your work Dave, I'm not sure which. You've got three open places now in Columbia. Are you negotiating with any more right now, would be a key question.

Andrea Morris: We're always negotiating. I attend trade shows with clients. On Thursday for instance, I have a monthly meeting with clients from all over the greater Columbia area through an apartment association. Literally stuff could pop up within days of meetings. One of our new properties Sola Station, it's being built. A lot of times those properties, before they're even breaking ground, they're contacting us and saying, "Hey, we just got approved that we're going to start building this new community. We want a team by the time it's ready." Whether it's older communities, newer communities, they could pop up at any time. We're constantly recruiting new clients and having those meetings and reaching out in that way, all the time.

Chris Reinolds: So say you have church that has a community that's a stone's throw away from them. What would you suggest that they do as far as first steps?

David Hickman: I would say number one, go to the website. Go to [apartmentlife.org](http://www.apartmentlife.org) and check it out, read about it. Number two, particularly here in Columbia, I would say contact Andrea. She's our leader here on the ground. I live in Charlotte so I don't get out here but maybe four or five times a year.

Andrea Morris: When I drag him.

David Hickman: Yeah, that's right. Andrea, what would you add? The churches listening, going, "Man, I want to get involved."

Andrea Morris: Yeah, I would say definitely email me. My email is andreamorris, A-N-D-R-E-A-M-O-R-R-I-S @apartmentlife L-I-F-E .org, and let me know what churches you are interested in. From there, I can do my research and say, "Hey, we can look and see if this owner or management company has ever used us," because we do, we're nationwide so from California to here we can look at all of our clients, see if it's a possibility. Then from there I can say, "Yep, I'll reach out to them." I'll do my due diligence in trying to form that partnership with them. If it's one that I can say, "Look, we've tried before. We really don't see that it's going to work out," then we can help and give you any kind of materials or training that we use for our teams to make sure that you guys are set up well to minister to the people there.

Chris Reinolds: That's good.

Andrea Morris: Then my cell phone number is 8-

Chris Reinolds: We'll put your contact for your cell phone-

Andrea Morris: He's got it.

Chris Reinolds: We'll put it in there, that way you're not saying that over the airways.

David Hickman: LinkedIn profile [crosstalk 00:21:00]

Chris Reinolds: All the other kind of stuff.

George Bullard: BR549.

Andrea Morris: Yeah.

Chris Reinolds: Let me say, hats off to you for being able to say out your email address without messing it up because I don't know that I would've been able to do that.

Andrea Morris: I was waiting on it.

Chris Reinolds: Well, once again Dave and Andrea, thank you so much for coming out and just sharing with us today this information. I think that it has the propensity to be able to make some major difference in our community.

David Hickman: No question.

George Bullard: Yes, we really do appreciate it. Thank you so much.

David Hickman: George, thanks for having us.

Andrea Morris: Thank you guys.

George Bullard: Yeah.

Chris Reinolds: Absolutely.

David Hickman: Thanks Chris.

Chris Reinolds: If you're interested in connecting with Dave or Andrea with Apartment Life, please be sure to check our show notes from today's episode and all of the applicable links will be there. Also, if you found this podcast helpful with Apartment Life, to you or your ministry, share it with others so that we can get the word out about what God is doing in the Columbia metro area. Until next time, from all of us at the Columbia Metro Connection, we thank you for listening and we urge you to share this podcast with everyone you know. It's the good news about the good news from the Columbia Metro Baptist Association.