Pew Internet & American Life PROJECT

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CyberFaith:
How Americans Pursue Religion Online

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Note: This is the first of two reports we will issue about spiritual life online. The second will be available in spring, 2002, and be based on an online survey of those who use the Internet to get religious and spiritual information. For information on how to participate, write to religion@pewinternet.org.

Executive Summary

28 million Americans have used the Internet to get religious and spiritual information and connect with others on their faith journeys. We call them "Religion Surfers."

- 25% of Internet users have gotten religious or spiritual information online at one point or another. This is an increase from our survey findings in late 2000, which showed that 21% of Internet users – or between 19 million and 20 million people – had gone online to get religious or spiritual material.
- More than 3 million people a day get religious or spiritual material, up from 2 million that we reported last year.
- For comparison's sake, it is interesting to note that more people have gotten religious or spiritual information online than have gambled online, used Web auction sites, traded stocks online, placed phone calls on the Internet, done online banking, or used Internet-based dating services.

The September 11 terror attacks compelled millions of Internet users to turn to religious issues and concerns online.

- 41% of Internet users, many of whom had never considered themselves online spiritual seekers, said they sent or received email prayer requests.
- 23% of Internet users turned to online sources to get information about Islam. Presumably, most of them considered this to be information-gathering activity rather than spiritual activity.
- 7% of Internet users contributed to relief charities online.

The most popular online religious activities are solitary ones. Most Religion Surfers treat the Net as a vast ecclesiastical library and they hunt for general spiritual information online. However, they also interact with friends and strangers as they swap advice and prayer support.

- 67% of Religion Surfers have accessed information on their own faith.
- 50% have sought information on other faiths.
- Religion Surfers appear to be more comfortable *offering* spiritual advice online than *requesting* it: 35% have used email to offer advice, while 21% have sought advice in an email.
- 38% of Religion Surfers have used email to send prayer requests. The practice is far more common among congregation members (42%) than non-members (12%).

Within the Religion Surfer population, variations in religious devotion, history, and affiliation play a role in determining what activities attract individuals.

Religion Surfers' online practices can be studied from several viewpoints, based on their offline activities and history. Four patterns of practice highlight different groups: Active Religion Surfers use the Internet in different ways from less-active Religion Surfers; religious converts use the Internet in different ways from faith loyalists who remain with the religion in which they were raised; religious outsiders use the Internet in different ways from insiders who consider themselves in the mainstream of their communities; and church or temple members use the Internet in different ways from non-members.

- The most active online Religion Surfers (those who go online at least several times a week for spiritual material) are also the most active offline participants in their faiths.
- Those who have converted from the religion in which they were raised are more likely than those who have not to be active Religion Surfers (33% vs. 24%).
- Religious outsiders are particularly interested in using the Internet to meet others of their own faith and share items of religious interest. Outsiders are those who see themselves as a minority, who say they have few people of the same religion in their local communities, or who say they have faced discrimination due to their beliefs.

A table listing the things Religion Surfers do online can be found on page 13 of this report.

For Religion Surfers, the Internet is a useful supplemental tool that enhances their already-deep commitment to their beliefs and their churches, synagogues, or mosques. Use of the Internet also seems to be especially helpful to those who feel they are not part of mainstream religious groups. About 27% of Religion Surfers attribute to the Internet at least some improvement in their faith lives. Religion Surfers are optimistic about the Web's potential to improve the religious life of others, while at the same time they are fearful of the Internet's ability to do harm to others by making heretical or cult-inspired material so easily accessible.

- 15% of Religion Surfers say their use of the Internet has made them feel more committed to their faith, and 27% say it has improved their spiritual life to at least a modest degree.
- 35% believe that the Internet has a "mostly positive" effect on the religious life of others. And 62% of Religion Surfers say that the availability of material on the Internet encourages religious tolerance.
- 53% of Religion Surfers fear that the Internet makes it too easy for fringe groups to promote themselves in ways that can harm people.

Religion Surfers are distinguished from other Americans by their religious devotion, rather than conventional demographics. They take their faith seriously in the offline world and use online tools to enrich their knowledge of their faith and to practice their devotions.

- 81% of Religion Surfers describe their religious faith as "very strong," compared to 61% of the general public who said in a March 2000 Gallup poll that religion was "very important" in their life.

- 74% of Religion Surfers attend religious services at least once a week. Polls such as the General Social Survey, Gallup, and the National Election Study show that 26% to 39% of Americans attend religious services every week.
- 86% of Religion Surfers pray or meditate at least once a day. By comparison, 54% of all Americans say they pray that often, and 23% say they meditate every day.

Many Religion Surfers think key spiritual resources are more easily available online than offline.

- 64% of Religion Surfers believe that the Internet provides easier access to religious study and educational materials than they can otherwise find offline.
- Nearly half (44%) believe that the Internet provides easier access to prayer and other devotional materials than they can otherwise find offline.
- Non-members of religious organizations rely on the Internet to find resources that members of actual congregations are likely to find in their faith communities.

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Main Report

Introduction: Are Internet users singing out for that online religion?

As early as 1996, "Time" magazine documented a rich world of online religion sites.[1] It started with the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in remote New Mexico. The depiction of that natural beauty and peace that pervades the monastic landscape was expected. The image of robed monks mastering HTML code and jerry rigging an Internet connection through solar panels and a single cell-phone line was not. It illustrated a new world of spiritual place, time, and practice.

This site (http://www.christdesert.org/pax.html) is only one example among thousands demonstrating how people of faiths both mainstream and esoteric can find something for themselves online. Whether they need advice on fine points of canonical law, special music for a service, ideas for devotional study, material for a religious class, support in prayer, or simply a spirited debate that they cannot introduce in their own circle of friends, they can find it all in the glow of an Internet-connected monitor. The Web allows the faithful wide access to resources and links, and it offers the doubtful or curious a safe place to explore. It is a favorite venue for those rejecting mainstream religions to revive ancient faiths. It allows for Luther-esque defiance of the reigning powers, as demonstrated by exiled Roman Catholic bishop Jacques Gaillot who has established an online "diocese without borders."[2] The richness of the landscape creates a lush spiritual plain that is explored here in a survey of how online Americans use religious and spiritual material online.

In a survey from August 13-September 10 this year, the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that about 28 million Americans, or 25% of the Internet population, visit religious cyberspace, with more than 3 million seeking spiritual material on any given day. This is an increase from a survey finding by the Project in late 2000, showing that 21% of a smaller overall population of Internet users had gone online to get religious or spiritual material. At that time about two million people were using such Internet material on any given day. We call these online Americans "Religion Surfers."

Some may find comfort in the fact that spiritual browsing is a more popular online activity than online gambling, which has only been sampled by about 5% of the Internet population.[3] The act of searching for spiritual material online has also been done by more Americans than have traded stocks or bonds or mutual funds online, or done online banking, or participated in online auctions, or used Internet-based dating services, or placed phone calls online.

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[1] "Finding God on the Web" *Time Magazine*, 12/16/96.

[2] See http://www.partenia.org/eng

[3] August 13-September 10, 2001 tracking survey of the Pew Internet & American Life Project

The variety of sites available to them appears boundless. They range from denominations and branches with large constituencies to sites posted by individuals in veneration of their deities. They run the gamut from multi-faith, multi-service sites such as Beliefnet.com and FaithandValues.com to sites set up for specific faiths and purposes, such as introducing singles of the same religion.

Religion Surfers are deeply devout

The percent of Religion Surfers who say these activities are very important to them

Solitary meditation or prayer	85%
Volunteering to help others	71%
Regular worship or prayer	70%
Conversation with fellow worshipers	69%
Group celebration of holidays	55%
Small group study	50%
Spending time in nature	45%
Regular confession	44%
Speaking with clergy or other advisors	43%
Going online for religious information	13%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500 and margin of error is ±4%.

The popularity of religious Web sites raises an important issue about the extent to which Religion Surfers view themselves as *practicing* religion online. Religious observance is by nature both solitary and communal, and the contribution of the Internet to that space can be confusing. On the one hand, the Internet could be seen as an electronic prayer book, an aid to personal devotion, or a reference guide to spiritual issues without being an actual part of religious observance. On the other hand, an Internet site could be a "place" where people come together, either to chat or to pray or even worship with people around the globe who may be at the same site at the same time.

Demographer George Barna believes that eventually the Internet will fundamentally change the nature of worship among Christians. In his surveys of both adults and teenagers he has found marked interest in online sources of religious inspiration, and believes that by the end of the decade, millions of individuals with no faith community will take to practice and worship on the Web. But he also warns that "millions of others will be people who drop out of the physical church in favor of the cyberchurch."[4]

The Pew Internet & American Life Project turned to online Religion Surfers to explore Barna's ideas, to get a sense of the things people do online when it comes to spiritual practices, and to learn how they think those activities affect their faith.

The audience is varied – most combine their online life with that of their own religious communities, seeking fuller comprehension and experience of their faiths. Some have long ago left their churches, synagogues, or temples, but still use the Internet to pursue their own spiritual needs. Some have changed faiths and seek out new information. Some feel isolated for their beliefs, and find communion with others in cyberspace where they cannot find it in their own neighborhoods. Many have mixed evaluations of the powers of the Internet. Many see it as a useful supplemental tool in their faith life, especially because it allows them access to additional spiritual information and resources. And they think that online spiritual material can be a force for good because it helps people of faith find each other more easily

[4] "Internet's Religious Applications Getting Noticed" http://cyberatlas.internet.com/big_picture/demographics/article/0,1323,5901_772091,00.html

and because the availability of such material encourages religious tolerance. But they also worry that there is too much sacrilegious material online and that fringe groups can exploit Internet tools to damage others. The picture is as rich and varied as religious life itself.

This report is the first in a two-part study of religion and the Internet. This report is based on the results of a telephone survey of 500 adults who had told us in previous surveys that they sought out spiritual or religious Internet sites. It represents as closely as possible a random sample of all adult Internet surfers in the nation. The second part will be an online survey that will be open to all who care to participate, and in which we particularly hope to encourage the participation of religious minorities. For information on how to participate, write to religion@pewinternet.org.

Part 1: Defining the Religion Surfers

On the whole, Religion Surfers are present in all segments of society. They are fairly evenly spread out among men and women, blacks and whites, various age groups, and various economic and educational-attainment levels.[5] Unlike many other online activities, the act of getting religious or spiritual information online is not strongly related to an Internet user's level of experience. In many other activities, online experience correlates to higher level of participation in the activity – such as getting news online, or purchasing goods online, or doing work-related research online. This is not the case with Religion Surfers.

Faith profile of online Religion Surfers

	Religion Surfers	*Religiously-affiliated US Population**	*Total US Population**
	%	%	%
Christian	91%	89%	77%
No affiliation	1.8%	*	14%
Jewish	1.6%	1.6%	1.4%
Buddhist	1.6%	0.6%	0.5%
Muslim	0.6%	0.6%	0.5%
Other religion	3%	7.3%	6.3%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500 and margin of error is ±4%.

**American Religious Identification Survey, 2001, shown at http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/key_findings.htm*

The Religion Surfers we surveyed parallel the religious profile of the American population at large. Christianity predominates among American Religion Surfers, but the group also includes a mix of religious minorities such as Unitarians, Baha'I, Taoists, and Pagans.

However, the intensity of religious devotion of Religion Surfers distinguishes them from the general population. Some 81% of online Religion Surfers describe their commitment to faith as "very strong," compared to only 19% of the population as a whole.[6] Furthermore, they say they back up

[5] Pew Internet and American Life Project August 13-September 10, 2001 Tracking Survey

[6] 19% figure taken from the 1998 General Social Survey in response to the question "To what extent to you consider yourself a religious person?"

these claims in practice; 74% of Religion Surfers attend religious services at least once a week, compared to estimates ranging from 26%-39% of the general population.[7] And 86% of Religion Surfers pray or meditate at least once a day, compared to 54% of all Americans.

The traits that shape Religion Surfers

The most interesting differences among Religion Surfers appear when they are asked about aspects of their religious history and their spiritual practices. A few distinct groups emerged whose patterns of belief and surfing presented different pictures of faith online. These are:

- Active Seekers, those who spend the most time tracking down religious or spiritual content;
- Converts, those who have adopted a different faith than that in which they were raised;
- Community Members, those who belong to a congregation or worship group; and
- Outsiders, those who are acutely aware of belonging to a religious minority, and who may have felt discrimination based on their beliefs.

The groups are not mutually exclusive; there is some overlap among them. Still, we find that the distinctions provide useful ways to examine the differences in the Religion Surfer population.

Active Seekers: 27% of the overall Religion Surfers population

"Active Seekers" are those who log onto the Internet to get religious material daily or at least several times per week. By contrast, less active Religion Surfers access religious material on average less than once a week. The Active Seeker group is diverse – it runs the gamut on age, income, race, education, and Internet experience.

Active Seekers have incorporated Internet-related devotion into lives that are already richly devout. They are more likely than less-active Religion Surfers to describe their religious commitment as "very strong" (88% vs. 78%). They are more likely to belong to a church or other religious community (90% vs. 82%) and more likely to spend time at that church. Fully 65% of Active Seekers claim to be "very involved" in their places of worship, and 58% attend religious services more than once a week. Only 33% of those who are less active online attend so often. In addition to participating heavily in communal life, Active Seekers practice private prayer and meditation more often than others. Fully 70% pray at least once a day, compared to 53% of less active seekers praying that often.

Active Religion Surfers are also more likely to classify as "very important" seven out of ten items in our list of spiritual practices, including prayer, worship, volunteering, small group study, confession, conversations with spiritual advisors, and even going online for religious purposes.

[7] 1998 General Social Survey, 2000 National Election Study

These patterns show those who are already highly devout and have Internet access are likely to transfer their devotional interests to their surfing habits. While we cannot speculate on what makes any individual devout, we have found that Active Seekers are more likely than the rest of the Religion Surfer population to have converted from the faith in which they were raised (44% vs. 33%).

Active Seekers are very devoted to their religion

Percent who say this element of their faith life is "very important" to them

	Active Seekers N=136*	*Less-Active Seekers** N=364*
The things Active Seekers feel more strongly about		
Solitary meditation or prayer	93%	82%
Regular group worship	81%	66%
Volunteer work to help others	80%	67%
Small group study	64%	45%
Speaking with clergy or other advisors	60%	39%
Regular confession	55%	39%
Going online for religious material	27%	9%
Practices appreciated more equally between active and less-active surfers		
Group celebration of holidays	54%	56%
Spending time in nature	48%	43%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500 and margin of error is ±4%.

** Active Seekers go online at least several times a week for religious information*

*** Less-Active Seekers go online less frequently*

Converts: 36% of the Religion Surfers population

Converts are those who now practice a faith different from that which they practiced at age 16. Conversions include those within a larger faith, say a Protestant Christian who becomes chrismated (anointed with oil to mark their reception into the church) into the Orthodox Church, as well as complete changes of tradition, such as a Catholic who turns to Buddhism. The opposite of a Convert is someone we call a Faith Loyalist – that is, a person who has stuck with the faith tradition in which she was raised. As with Active Seekers, Converts largely mirror the demographic attributes of those who have remained with their original faiths

Converts are more likely than Faith Loyalists to belong to a non-Christian religion (14% to 5%). This tendency to be outside of the mainstream may explain why Converts are more likely than Faith Loyalists to see themselves as Religious Outsiders, by a margin of 19% to 8%.

Converts surf for religious material somewhat more frequently than Faith Loyalists, and are especially appreciative of the Internet's ability to provide quick access to educational resources. Fully 71% of Converts say it would be easier for them to find such resources online than offline.

Converts' devotion across a range of practices appears mixed. Converts are more likely than Faith Loyalists to say they have a strong religious commitment (84% vs. 79%) and are more likely to attend services more than once a week (47% vs. 36%) despite being less likely to belong to a formal church or religious group (79% vs. 89%). However, Converts are also more likely than Faith Loyalists to have used the Internet to look for a new congregation by

a margin of 19% to 11%. Convert and Faith Loyalist alike are committed to the practice of individual prayer and meditation, 85% of each professing to do so at least once a day.

Finally, Converts are more likely than Faith Loyalists to have provided spiritual advice via email. Each group is equally likely to have sought spiritual advice via email.

Members: 84% of the Religion Surfers population

Members are those who belong to a church, synagogue, temple, or other formal worship group. Members are overwhelmingly women, by a 61% to 39% margin. They are more likely than non-members to find spiritual practices to be "very important" except for "spending time in nature," where non-members beat them out 63% to 41%.

Church Members surf for religious material slightly more often than non-members.

Differences between church members and non-members in their approach to online material

The percent who say it is easier to do these things online rather than offline

	Non-members N=75	*Members N=421*
Find religious resources	77%	62%
Find volunteer opportunities	31%	14%
Find people who share their faith	28%	15%
Look for a new church or temple	23%	12%
Participate in spiritual discussions	18%	9%
Conduct worship	9%	3%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500 and margin of error is ±4%.

Members are more likely than non-members to be Christian (95% vs. 72%). By contrast, non-members are more likely to belong to faiths that may not be familiar to many Americans; 10% of non-members belong to "some other religion" than Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism.

Non-members are more likely than Members to have used the Internet to look up information on faiths other than their own (61% to 48%), and, ironically, to look for a new church or congregation (24% to 12%). Members, on the other hand, are more likely to use the Internet for activities that might be more comfortable for those already in religious communities – such as giving spiritual advice, planning religious activities, and making prayer requests.

Religious Outsiders: 12% of the Religion Surfers online

In a country in which 89% of the religious population considers itself Christian, there are bound to be people who feel their faith puts them outside of the mainstream. Given the diversity of Christianity, many "minority" Christians might also feel disaffected. We classified a group of "Religious Outsiders" based on responses to three questions: whether they feel their religion is widely accepted in this country, whether there are many people of their own faith in their communities, or whether they believe they have run up against religious discrimination. Those who provided responses that showed some level of alienation in two out of three of those questions were placed in the Outsider category.

Religious Outsiders span all ages, races, education and income levels. They are less likely than Insiders to be Christian, but still, 74% of Outsiders say they are Christian. Our sample included 15 members of faiths other than the major Western religions, 73% of whom considered themselves outsiders. By contrast, only 8% of Christians consider themselves Outsiders.

Outsiders and insiders are surprisingly similar. They profess commitment to their faiths equally (about 80% of each group claims "very strong" faith), and are equally likely to consider "very important" most of the spiritual practices we asked about. Outsiders are less likely than insiders to belong to a formal congregation (66% vs. 87%). It is not surprising, then to note that formal group worship is less important to Outsiders than to insiders (57% vs. 72%). In addition, Outsiders are more likely than insiders to extol the virtues of spending time in nature (64% vs. 42%).

Religious Outsiders are slightly more likely than insiders to find it easier to interact with clergy (12% vs. 7% for insiders) and find others who share the same faith (24% vs. 16% for insiders) online than offline. However, the majority of Outsiders (76%) still find it easier to connect with clergy offline than online. And 59% of Outsiders say it is easier to meet with people of the same faith offline than online.

Part 2: What Religion Surfers do online

Religion Surfers are a spiritually well-rounded group who incorporate into their spiritual lives communal and individual activities, formal and informal practices. The most valued spiritual activities to Religion Surfers are individual prayer (85%), volunteer service (71%), communal worship (70%), and informal conversations with friends (69%). By contrast, the importance to them of going online for religious material is relatively low, with only 13% considering it "very important" to them.

Whether or not online content and activities contribute materially to their spiritual life, however, Religion Surfers still have favorite Internet-based activities. Active Seekers in particular like to explore various online materials, and are more likely than any other group to have participated in most types of online activity or practice.

Activities of online Religion Surfers

The percentage of Religion Surfers who have ever …

Looked for information about their own faith	67%
Looked for information about another faith	50%
Emailed a prayer request	38%
Downloaded religious music	38%
Given spiritual guidance via email	37%
Bought religious items online	34%
Planned religious activities via email	29%
Gotten idea for religious ceremonies online	28%
Subscribed to a religious listserv	27%
Downloaded sermons	25%
Gotten ideas for ways to celebrate religious holidays	22%
Sought spiritual guidance via email	21%
Gone online to find a new church	14%
Participated in religious chat rooms	10%
Played spiritual computer games	5%
Participated in online worship	4%
Taken an online religious course	3%
Used a faith-oriented matchmaking service	3%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500 and margin of error is ±4%.

Reference and study

Religion Surfers enjoy perusing religious topics, and the Internet remains a browser's dream. The top uses by Religion Surfers are simply to find information on their own faith or another one. Almost all non-Christians (96%) report seeking information on their own faiths. In this predominantly Christian country, the Internet may well be the most fruitful and convenient source of information on other religious traditions.

Among Religion Surfers, men are more likely than women to have used the Internet as a reference, 73% vs. 62% for researching their own faiths, and 57% to 46% for researching other faiths. Men are also twice as likely as women to have sought out sermons or other instruction online, 35% to 18%. While online religion courses would fit into this category of study, they are not yet popular. There are many plausible reasons for this, not the least of which might be that 85% of Internet users in America have slow dial-up modems that could make online coursework difficult and frustrating. It is far easier to simply browse at one's convenience on topics of interest.

Social activities

Old-fashioned face-to-face socializing is much more appealing to Religion Surfers than tech-aided interactions with others that are related to faith. Among the five least-used activities

among Religion Surfers, three are largely social: online chat, playing faith-oriented computer games,[8] and using a faith-oriented matchmaking service.

In a different sense, however, the very nature of seeking religious material online appears to be a social one. Half of Religion Surfers have recommended a site to a friend or relative, and these recommendations are primary sources of favored sites. Some 44% of those who have a single favorite site learned of it from a friend or relative, rather than from their own searching. And 63% of Religion Surfers with a favorite site pass the URL along. However, while favorite sites may bounce around existing social networks, they do not serve to create new ones. Only 15% of those with favorite sites report using them to meet new people.

Advice and support

Those willing to seek advice or assistance can often find help online. Religion Surfers are quite generous. When asked about the support capabilities of the Web, they were far more likely to have reported giving faith-oriented advice (37%) than asking for it (21%). Women are more active than men in both seeking and giving advice.

Some 38% of Religion Surfers have used email to request prayer assistance. Online, one can put out prayer requests to close friends within one's own congregation,[9] to total strangers who volunteer their prayer time at Web sites, or to strangers who come together in online prayer circles to request prayers from and post them for each other. Congregation members are over three times as likely (42% vs. 12%) to have emailed prayer requests, suggesting that this intimate kind of interaction might be most practiced within existing communities.

The value of listservs

Advice manuals for creating successful Web sites stress repeatedly the need to keep content fresh and interesting. One means of providing regular fresh content is to provide a listserv. Religion Surfers can sign up for daily devotional material or updates from religious news services. Nearly one in three (27%) Religion Surfers are signed up to some sort of listserv, but it is particularly popular among Active Seekers. As stands to reason, Active Seekers are more likely than all others to have taken part in the activities we asked about, but in no other activity is the difference between Active Seekers and Religion Surfers as a whole so large. With almost half of Active Seekers subscribing to some form of religious listserv, they stretch 20 percentage points ahead of all Religion Surfers as a whole.

[8] Many online faith-oriented games are multi-player role-playing games, and thus constitute social rather than individual activity.

[9] Our report on Internet use in congregations, "Wired Churches, Wired Temples" (http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=28) showed that 18% of responding congregations provided a place on their Web site for members to enter prayer requests, and that an additional 22% hoped to do so in the future.

Spending money, tuning in

Online shopping and downloading music are two popular activities in the general Internet world. Shopping may be more of a secular activity online than a favorite pastime of Religion Surfers: 55% of all Internet users have purchased something online, whereas only 34% of Religion Surfers have clicked "head to checkout" for religious items. But music, whether sacred or worldly, enjoys equal appreciation among groups. Some 38% of both the Internet population as a whole and Religion Surfers in particular have listened to online music, and over half of young people (18-29) in both groups have done so.

Active Seekers are the most likely to have done most spiritual activities online

	Active Seekers	*Less Active Seekers*
Look for information about their own faith	76%	63%
Give or receive faith-oriented guidance	51%	29%
Subscribe to a faith-oriented listserv	46%	20%
Get ideas for religious ceremonies	39%	24%
Get ideas for religious holidays	29%	19%
Find a new church or congregation	22%	11%
Participate in faith-oriented chat rooms	16%	8%
Participate in online worship	9%	2%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500, Margin of error is ±4%.

Contributing money

It is hardly a revelation that Religion Surfers contribute to their places of worship. Fully 92% of them have done that. However, only a few have actually used the Internet to make contributions. Just 7% of Religion Surfers have made donations to a religious organization they found online. And only a fraction of that small group (14%) has actually made the contribution online.

Part 3: A case study of the most recent time Religion Surfers went online for spiritual purposes

Getting started

In addition to asking respondents about their general use of the Internet to get religious and spiritual information, we also asked a series of questions about the most recent time they went online for such information. We have used this technique in other research to try to understand more fully the kinds of information people seek, the strategies they use to find the information that matters to them, and their satisfaction with Internet tools in getting them the material they want.

In our sample of 500 Religion Surfers, 9% of them had looked for religious or spiritual information via the Internet on the same day we reached them, 26% had gone online for such information within the past week, 29% had made the search within the past month, 26% had made the search in the past six months and 9% had performed the search more than six months ago.

Not surprisingly, the people who had searched quite recently for information (those who searched within the past week) very closely match the profile of our Active Seekers in their enthusiasm for their faith, their involvement with their places of worship, and their personal prayer practices.

Why they went online

The substantial majority of these Religion Surfers were trying to get information, rather than using the communication features of the Internet to interact with fellow church members or others who are interested in spiritual issues. A strong plurality of the respondents were doing searches related to their personal spiritual growth.

Three-quarters of these Religion Surfers (76%) went to three or fewer sites in their most recent online quest.

Religion Surfers' favorite sites

One significant finding is that the Religion Surfers who say they have a favorite spiritually-oriented Web site were different kinds of searchers than were those who didn't have a favorite site. In general, 42% of Religion Surfers said they have a favorite place on the Web, while 55% said they tend to go to different sites in their spiritually-related searches.

What Religion Surfers did online in their most recent Internet session

The percent who said they logged on to …

Find educational or devotional materials	40%
Find general information about a religious faith or tradition	29%
Communicate with people in their church	11%
Give or receive faith-oriented support	8%
Do something for some other reason related to their faith	7%
Find churches, religious schools, or other faith-based organizations	4%
Engage in prayer or worship services	3%
Look up religious songs, download music, or listen to spiritual music	2%
Purchase religious items	1%
Browse out of curiosity	1%
Find news about religious issues	1%
Don't know/refused to answer	3%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500 and margin of error is ±4%.

In their most recent search, 39% of our respondents said they went to a familiar place online, while the rest either went to search engines like Google or Yahoo (36% did this), or a more general site such as the AOL home page or MSN.com (15% did that), or a religious portal (4% did that). Those who had a favorite site were more likely to have gone online in the last week than those who have not found a favorite cyberspot (40% to 33%). And those who have bookmarked or remembered a favorite Web site were more focused in their time online: 60% went straight to their favorite site, while 49% of those without a favorite site begin their searches at a major search engine.

The features of Religion Surfers' favorite sites

The percent who say their favorite site...

	Has this feature and they use it	*Has this feature, but they don't use it*	*Does not have this feature*	*Don't know or refused to answer*
Information about their own faith or religion	67%	13%	18%	2%
Information about social issues important to people who share their faith	44%	20%	26%	10%
Guided meditations, devotions, or other material for personal prayer	41%	20%	29%	10%
Books, music or other religious material for sale	35%	38%	21%	7%
Information about different faiths or religions	16%	13%	66%	5%
Interactive prayer requests and responses	15%	24%	48%	13%
Chat rooms and bulletin boards	12%	27%	43%	18%
Regular online worship services	5%	8%	74%	13%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500 and margin of error is ±4%.

There was no dominant pattern to the favorite sites Religion Surfers identified. The 208 respondents who said they had a favorite site identified more than 100 different sites as their favorites – some of the sites were focused on one denomination or institution, some were ecumenical, some were devout, some seemed more skeptical, some were commercial, some were tied to religiously oriented organizations, some were oriented towards religious approaches to social and political issues, some focused exclusively on ecclesiastical matters, and some included religious material amidst a wide array of secular content.

Overall, 55% of the respondents said their favorite site was affiliated with a particular religious or spiritual group that they belong to and 42% said their favorite site did not have that kind of personal affiliation. And every one of those who said the site was connected to a group they belonged to also report that they belonged to the group *before* they found the site. In other words, at least for those we call Religion Surfers, use of the Internet does not lead them to join a new faith-based organization or group as much as help them connect better

with organizations to which they already belong. This is different from our findings related to many secular kinds of communities. We have found that use of the Internet has led people to join groups that they didn't belong to before they started using the Internet.

How they found their favorite sites

Word-of-mouth and offline marketing are the major ways that people have found a favorite spiritually oriented Web site. Fully half of those who have such a site (46%) say they found out about it from a family member or friend or in a church publication or bulletin. Another 31% say they saw an advertisement for the site or found it through TV, radio, or a magazine. Just 18% say they found their favorite site during an online search or chanced upon it while browsing the Web.

Did Religion Surfers find it easy or hard to get what they wanted online?

More than half of these Religion Surfers (56%) said it was very easy to find the information they wanted and another 32% said their search was somewhat easy to perform. Only 10% expressed some frustration with the difficultly of doing what they wanted to accomplish online.

We have asked similar questions of several other kinds of Internet users and have found roughly similar results. Those who belong to communities online (communities of all types, not just those that have a religious component), those who get health information online, those who used the Internet to get information about the terror attacks on America on September 11, and those who use government agency Web sites report similar levels of satisfaction or facility in their recent attempts to use the Internet for those purposes. For instance, 80% of those who use government Web sites say they accomplished what they wanted in their most recent effort to use such sites.

Part 4: Religion Surfers evaluate the impact of the Internet

A matter of faith

Studies in all areas have tried to get at the issue of whether the Internet *qua* Internet has powers that can change people. Concerns have arisen (and been challenged) as to whether Internet use fosters social isolation. The Southern Poverty Law Center, a group which defends victims of hate crimes, watched with alarm as the number of hate sites on the Web seemed to skyrocket. Then it determined that more damage came out of the social interaction in offline discussion groups and rock concerts, rather than from static Web sites themselves.[10] In this report, we look at a slippery question indeed – can the Internet significantly affect a person's religious life?

Assessing the Internet's benefits

The percent of Religion Surfers who say each activity is done more easily online than offline

Find educational or study materials	64%
Find prayer or devotional resources	44%
Find people who share your beliefs	17%
Pursue volunteer opportunities	17%
Participate in spiritual discussions	10%
Interact with clergy and advisers	7%
Participate in religious services	4%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500 and margin of error is ±4%.

The answers we got from Religion Surfers are both expected and quizzical. Not surprisingly, for Religion Surfers Internet browsing itself fell far behind traditional offline practices of prayer, worship, and service to others in the evaluation of the importance of spiritual practices. Few (2%) said that the Internet was a major aspect of their practice of faith. Nonetheless, some Religion Surfers attributed improvement in their spiritual life to their use of the Internet. Many more said they thought that use of the Internet could influence the spiritual lives of others.

The power of prayer

One primary area of religious practice that might be affected by Web resources is prayer. Fully 85% of Religion Surfers said that that private prayer and meditation were "very important" to their spiritual life and almost half of Religion Surfers said they found prayer resources more readily available online than offline. Nonetheless, it would appear that those who rely on the Internet for prayer resources do not see themselves as "practicing" prayer online, any more than someone using a prayer book might see the book as a medium of prayer. The means are external, the practice internal – and that might explain why even the most devout users of online resources did not feel that the Internet was critically important to their faith life.

Even if a spiritual practice is not altered by the Internet, the availability of online resources may have other effects. Some people recognize how seeking of spiritual material online has increased their own commitment to their faith, and even more people believe that the Internet can provide some beneficial effects. One in six Religion Surfers (15%) say that online resources have contributed to their own faith commitment, and 27% said it had improved their spiritual life to at least a modest degree.

[10] "Hate On-Line: Reevaluating the Net" Intelligence Report, Summer 2001, pp. 54-55.

The impact on themselves

Not surprisingly, the Active Seekers were the most enthusiastic proponents of the spiritual benefits of the Internet. Some 26% of them said their use of the Internet increased their commitment to their faith – that is a rate 9 percentage points higher than the Religion Surfers group as a whole, and 16 percentage points higher than less active Religion Surfers. The most active Religion Surfers also showed a marked difference in recognizing the benefits to their spiritual life, with 46% citing some improvement, compared to 20% for the rest of the Religion Surfer population.

There is probably a two-directional effect taking place here. Netizens with strong religious beliefs would naturally be drawn to faith-oriented sites, and would derive benefits from such sites that would bring them back online for more. Religious sites would have to be rather exceptional to draw and sustain the attention of those with only a marginal interest in matters of faith. Also, as Active Seekers tend to be highly involved in offline religious activity, their online activities may simply serve to complement their interest in their flesh-and-blood faith communities.

Those who don't belong to a congregation are more likely than congregation members to cite some benefits from their online spiritual searches

The percent who say it is easier …

	Non-members	*Members*
To access reference materials online than offline	77%	62%
To learn about volunteer activities online than offline	31%	14%
To meet people of the same faith online than offline	28%	15%
To participate in faith-oriented conversations online than offline	18%	9%
To speak with clergy online than offline	15%	6%
To participate in worship online than offline	9%	3%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Religion Surfers Survey, July 24-August 15, 2001. N=500 and margin of error is ±4%.

It makes sense that Active Seekers would realize the most marked benefits from their online activities. It would appear intuitive that the Internet would do a lot for Religious Outsiders, those isolated in their communities who need only log on to meet their confederates worldwide. However, this group does not appear to be particularly lonely. About one in four Outsiders say it is easier for them to meet people of the same faith online, which is greater than the one in six religious insiders who say the same, but it does not seem a particularly high figure. Nor do Outsiders appear to need the Internet more than Insiders in any of the other aspects of study or practice we asked about.

Rather, the most enthusiastic beneficiaries of the Internet are those who do not belong to a congregation of worshipers. Non-members as a whole are less likely to describe themselves as having a "somewhat" or "very" strong commitment to their faiths (81% vs. 99%) but they are by no means less interested in the state of their souls. The Internet appears to provide for them many of the benefits of a congregation. Non-members are almost twice as likely as members to find it easier to meet people of the same faith online than off. They are also more likely to rely on the Internet than offline resources for reference materials, faith-oriented conversations, prayer resources, worship, speaking with clergy, and finding volunteer opportunities. And they are more likely to have sought out a new congregation (24% to 12%), even if they have not yet found one.

The impact on others

Interestingly, a notable portion of Religion Surfers appears quite optimistic about the effect of the Internet on others. Over one in three (35%) believed it has had a "mostly positive" effect on the religious life of others. Fully 62% of Religion Surfers believe that the availability of material on the Internet "encourages religious tolerance." Outsiders are less likely to share this rosy outlook. Still, almost half of them (47%) agree with it. And 86% of all Religion Surfers believe that the Internet helps people find others who share their religious beliefs.

But Religion Surfers also worry about undesirable material on the Web. Nearly two-thirds (64%) believe there is too much material on the Internet that is sacrilegious. Christians in particular worry about the amount of sacrilegious material available online. By the same token, 53% of Religion Surfers agree "it is too easy for fringe religious groups to use the Internet to hurt people." The belief that Internet content alone can lead to harm or benefits for viewers appears to exist in Religion Surfers, but may not be limited to them. It echoes long-running debates in this country over sex, violence, and commercialism in television programming.

The Internet and spiritual communities

In addition to the potential benefits and harms that the Internet poses to individuals, the evidence suggests that the Internet helps improve the workings of spiritual communities. In contrast to the 27% of individuals who claim their spiritual lives have been improved through the workings of cyberspace, 83% of congregations who participated in our study last year reported that their Web sites and use of email had helped the spiritual life of the congregation either some or a lot.[11] By creating better ties within a pre-existing community, by creating a Web presence, and by facilitating discussions that can be difficult to hold in other settings, congregations tightened bonds within their groups, re-established connections with former members, and in some cases, expanded their missions on a global scale. These are communal benefits. Web sites may not create new communities, but communities can create vibrant Web presences that redound to the benefit of their members.

Although we found that there are some spiritual things that Religion Surfers prefer to do online, we found little to support the theory that the Internet will take the faithful out of their churches and temples. While it may provide significant benefits to those who pray and do faith-related studies, use of the Internet does not appear to be as strong in forming new religious communities.

Meanwhile, the Internet brings a variety of benefits to different Religion Surfers. To those already highly engaged in their faiths and with a predilection for surfing, the Internet provides material that reinforces faith and surfing habits alike. To those highly engaged in their faith communities it brings new possibilities for members to work together, and reinforcing bonds that make the community strong. To those who remain outside of religious communities but want to pursue their spiritual needs, it provides resources for private practice and, to those who desire it, a safe place to explore re-entering a community of faith.

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[11] "Wired Churches, Wired Temples" at http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/tocasp?Report=28

Methodology

This report is based on several surveys of Americans about their use of the Internet. The overall figures about the size of the Religion Seeker population comes from a survey of 2,247 American adults (18 and over) between August 13-September 10, 2001. Some 1,135 of them are Internet users. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sample and other random effects is plus or minus 2 percentage points.

A more in-depth survey was given to 500 persons who have told survey takers at Princeton Survey Research Associates that they had ever gone online for religious or spiritual information. The telephone interviews among those 18 and older were conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between July 24, 2001 and August 15, 2001. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sample and other random effects is plus or minus 4 percentage points. In addition to sample error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Interviews for this survey were completed from a pre-screened sample of Internet users who in past surveys identified themselves as Internet religious or spiritual information Religion Surfers. Once the household was reached, interviewers asked to speak with the individual who had recently completed a telephone survey. Once the targeted person was on the phone, they were asked a few screening questions to make sure that they had ever gone online to look for religious or spiritual information.

At least 10 attempts were made to complete an interview at every household in the sample. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the changes of making contact with a potential respondent. Interview refusals were re-contacted at least once in order to try again to complete an interview. The final response rate for the callback portion of the survey is 66%.