EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE AT NOON (EST)
WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20

<u>Wired churches, wired temples:</u>
<u>*Taking congregations and missions into cyberspace*</u>

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Summary of findings

Our survey

We believe this is the first extensive quantitative effort to discover how churches and synagogues in the United States use the Internet. Over 1,300 congregations responded to an email from the Pew Internet & American Life Project and filled out an online survey that asked how they built and use their Web sites, how congregations and leaders use email, and whether their use of Internet tools has helped the spiritual and everyday life of their members. This is not a representative sample of all the congregations in the United States. However, the wide-ranging and extensive responses of congregations to this survey suggest that the Internet has become a vital force in many faith communities.

Congregational life on the Web

The survey reveals that the Internet is being used being used by congregations to strengthen the faith and spiritual growth of their members, evangelize and perform missions in their communities and around the world, and perform a wide variety of pious and practical activities for their congregations. Many believe the Internet has helped these faith communities become better places.

- 83% of those responding to our survey say that their use of the Internet has helped congregational life – 25% say it has helped a great deal.
- 81% say the use of email by ministers, staffs, and congregation members has helped the spiritual life of the congregation to some extent – 35% say it has helped a great deal.
- 91% say email has helped congregation members and members of the staff stay more in touch with each other – 51% say it has helped a great deal.
- 63% say email has helped the congregation connect at least a bit more to the surrounding community – 17% say it has helped a lot.

Most popular congregational Web site features

Most of the respondents are eager to use their Web sites to increase their presence and visibility in their local communities and explain their beliefs. They are much more likely to use the Web for one-way communication features such as posting sermons or basic information, than they are to have two-way communications features or interactive features such as spiritual discussions, online prayer, or fundraising. The most commonly used features on these Web sites are:

- 83% encourage visitors to attend
- 77% post mission statements, sermons, or other text concerning their faith.
- 76% have links to denomination and faith-related sites.
- 60% have links to scripture studies or devotional material.
- 56% post schedules, meeting minutes, and other internal communications.

<u>The breadth of activity online</u>

Many of the activities on the Web sites of responding churches and synagogues are those that might be expected: homilies are posted; pictures and perhaps a pictorial history of the church or temple and the denomination are offered; maps and directions are available; meeting times and places are listed; the basic activities of the congregation are highlighted; worship services are Webcast at some places; and online fundraising conducted.

But the scope of other activities is quite broad. Some congregations use email and online cards for recruiting new members. Some have pursued special missions such as serving a global community of believers, providing spiritual material for the deaf, offering worship and activities for gays, ministering to the homeless, serving the needs of diaspora Gypsies, and staying in touch with far-flung former members or those who have left the congregation to serve in the military or go to college. Some provide online activities for teenagers. Bible trivia quizzes, games, and graphics features are used to appeal to children. Some ministers and lay members use their church's Web site to teach college-level courses on theology. Others keep the congregation informed about mission work – for instance, we heard from one church that keeps in touch with a mission group in Siberia and another that collected clothes for a needy congregation in Grenada after hearing online from someone there. One church maintains a set of "mission apartments" which it lets out to travelers and church groups, and claims to have had a 95% increase in occupancy since publicizing them on its site.

The Web sites of respondents also offer intimate faith and service activities online. Several provide spaces for prayer requests. Some provide content that helps with daily prayer and devotional work, including Bible study. One maintains a robust dialogue over issues of science and faith. Many offer links to crisis counseling services and sometimes provide such help themselves. Some post Frequently Asked Questions (and answers) about the church or temple and the beliefs of members. Others offer "Ask the Pastor" email services. Several have used their Web sites to conduct searches for new clergy and other key staff. Some post guidelines for marriages. Others use the site to post homework assignments for confirmation class. Several offer members of the congregation free email accounts. And many told us that they know of newcomers who came to visit the church only after they checked out the Web site and after they vetted the background and beliefs of the pastor or rabbi.

<u>What the congregations are contemplating next on their Web sites</u>
Most of the congregations responding to our survey said they might add more features to their Web sites. In many cases, the new features would make the Web site more dynamic and allow it to serve more purposes. These are among the most likely additions we heard about:

- **29% say they might add photographs of congregation events to their sites.**

- 27% hope to post material for teens and their youth group.
- 22% want to provide space for prayer requests.
- 22% are thinking of including a sign-up feature for classes and programs.
- 18% want to provide links to scripture studies and devotional material.
- 16% are thinking of providing links to community sites such as the local media, the government, and festivals.

Internet use by clergy

A striking number of the clergy have turned to the Internet to get material for sermons, worship, education programs, and matters of doctrine. In all, 471 rabbis and ministers responded to this survey; here is what they have done online:

- 81% have gotten information for worship services.
- 77% have sought information on the Bible, Torah, or other scriptures.
- 72% have gotten devotional resources.
- 72% have gathered information for education programs.
- 59% have hunted for information on matters of doctrine.
- 57% have gotten information on other denominations and faiths.
- 54% have sought information on matters of faith.

Those who seek religious and spiritual information online

The ongoing phone polling by the Pew Internet Project shows that about a fifth of Internet users have gone online to get religious and spiritual information. Middle-aged African-American women are the most likely to get religious material online.

- 21% of Internet users (about 19 million to 20 million people) have used the Internet to seek spiritual and religious information. On a typical day online, more than 2 million people are getting such material.
- 33% of online blacks have sought such material, compared to 20% of online whites. This means that African-Americans with Internet access are 65% more likely to have sought religious information on the Web than online whites.
- 26% of online Southerners have sought spiritual material, 22% of online Midwesterners have done so, 20% of online Westerners have done so, while only 14% of those with Internet access in the Northeast have.

Methodology note

The results given in this survey are based on the responses of 1,309 Christian, Jewish, and Unitarian Universalist congregations from 49 states. Unlike many previous Pew Internet & American Life Project Reports, which are based on phone surveys designed to reach a representative portion of the population, this sample is not a scientifically accurate representation of the estimated 336,000 places of worship in the United States.[1] There is no

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[1] The U.S. Census Bureau does not independently collect information on houses of worship, but cites this number after compiling figures from other sources that report the number of congregations in their purview. 1999 Statistical Abstract of the United States, p. 70.

single registry of congregational URLs from which to draw a random sample. Our survey population consisted of congregations that had chosen to register with some umbrella organization, usually with their denomination, and then agreed to participate in the survey. Some major church organizations, such as the Roman Catholic church, the Southern Baptist church, and the Mormon church, do not have portals that allow for one-stop, nationwide gathering of congregational URLs. That made it harder to find such congregations and include them in the email solicitation to participate in the survey. All who participated filled out an online questionnaire on a password-protected server hosted by Princeton Survey Research Associates.

It is likely that this group of congregations is more enthusiastic about the Internet and more interested in using Internet tools than a randomly chosen group of congregations. This report is based on the responses of those who filled out the questionnaire.

Main Report

Introduction

The small amount of public, scholarly, and press attention paid to religion and the Internet has mostly centered on people's spiritual experiences online and on the emergence of religious portals such as Beliefnet.org, which provide comprehensive menus of information about different faiths, articles and commentary about spirituality, prayer rooms, church-finding search engines, and a host of other content and features. This is believed to be the first survey of individual congregations and how they use the Internet.

Our ongoing phone survey of Internet users suggests there is a healthy audience for religious and spiritual material online. Some 21% of Internet users, between 19 million and 20 million people, have looked for religious or spiritual information online. This makes the search for religious material a more popular feature on the Internet than the performance of online banking (which has been done by 18% of Internet users), participation in online auctions (which has been done by 15% of Internet users), and the use of online dating services (which has been done by 9% of Internet users). More than two million American Internet users are seeking religious or spiritual material on any given day.

The most striking demographic feature related this online activity is that African-Americans with Internet access are much more likely than online whites to have sought religious and spiritual information. Fully a third of online blacks (33%) have sought religious information, compared to 20% of online whites. That means blacks are 65% more likely to have sought such information compared to whites. In relative terms, the heaviest religious-information seekers are middle-aged African-American women – 38% of black women over 30 with Internet access have gone to religious Web sites.

In the overall population, online women are a bit more likely than men to have looked for religious information (23% to 19%). Those in middle age are more likely than their younger or older counterparts to have sought spiritual material and online parents are more likely than non-parents to have hunted for such information. Fully 26% of Southerners have sought spiritual material online, 22% of Midwesterners have done so, 20% of Westerners have done so, while only 14% of those in the Northeast have.

When it comes to spiritual institutions, the appeal of the Internet is quite clear. With an "always-on" presence on the Internet, congregations can provide a thorough depiction of themselves to those who might be too shy to enter the sanctuary or ask questions directly of members of the congregation. They can use their Web sites to allay those concerns and to display material about staff and members, their activities, and their faiths. And they can link to other Web sites to provide an abundance of material about their denomination's beliefs, sacraments, and doctrine without having to create the content themselves. Use of email can facilitate the logistics of congregational activities and create new opportunities for mission work and outreach in greater community. The communication capabilities of the Internet are equally valuable to evangelical and non-evangelical groups, to congregations seeking to increase their membership, and to congregations focused on developing their own laity. Unlike big e-commerce sites, congregations can have both a physical and cyber-presence in a

community. How they leverage their resources and promote their faith are issues of great relevance to them.

Yet, little research has been done on how individual congregations use Web sites to further their missions, spread their message, and serve their members and their communities. This study was undertaken for several reasons. First, churches and synagogues are important organizations in their neighborhoods and they are instrumental in creating tight-knit and robust networks that serve vital spiritual and fellowship needs for their members. It is important to examine how they use the Internet to serve the needs of their members and communities. Second, the vast majority of congregations existed before the Web became a vital communications tool for many Americans and their embrace of Internet tools can tell us a great deal about how the Web and email change and influence important relationships that ministers and rabbis have established with their congregations and that congregation members have with each other. Third, faith organizations are emblematic of other types of organizations that serve the social needs of people. If we begin to understand how they have exploited the Web and email, we can also being to understand the ways in which the Internet might affect fraternal organizations, social and political groups, hobby clubs, and other kinds of associations.

With those thoughts in mind, the Pew Internet Project set out to discover how congregations use their Web sites, email, and the research capabilities of the Internet. In all, 1,309 churches and synagogues responded to an email request and filled out an online survey. The faith breakdown of our respondent pool is as follows:

Responses to survey	
1,309 congregations filled out the online questionnaire	
Christian	87%
United Methodist	28%
Lutheran	24%
Presbyterian	9%
Episcopal	8%
Baptist	5%
Roman Catholic	3%
Pentecostal	3%
Non-denominational	3%
Church of God in Christ	1%
Greek Orthodox	1%
Other denominations	2%
Jewish	7%
Reform	5%
Conservative	1%
Reconstructionist	1%
Unitarian Universalist	6%

Part 1: Congregational Web sites

The advent of congregational sites

Among our respondents, Web sites were fairly well established: 44% have been up for over 2 years, and 78% for at least one year. They were generally created on an ad hoc basis by volunteers (66%) rather than as a planned action of the clergy or a committee (27%). Once running, however, the sites were not left entirely in the hands of volunteers; 81% of congregations have some sort of clearance procedure before new content can be added. One Webmaster wrote that his pastor deliberately curbs use of flashy technology on the site – "our page stays focused on the Word of God, and not on cyber display!"

Some 53% of sites can gauge the use of their sites through tracking hits, and a few track hits on every page so they can evaluate traffic patterns. One congregation stated that it had received hits from every continent.

Congregations host their sites through a variety of means. Many employ an account with commercial ISPs to host their sites and provide email accounts. Others use commercial ISPs that provide free space in return for advertising space on the site. Tripod.com, for example, provides free Web sites. Whenever a Tripod-run site is accessed, a pop-up window appears on the top of the user's screen indicating that the site belongs to a Tripod member, and offering advertising messages or links to such things as travel sites or mortgage lenders. Angelfire.com offers a similar service, although in at least one case, the Angelfire pop-up window offered a lottery-style powerball-type game suggesting the viewer could win several million dollars. When we

Who hosts congregational Web sites	
Percent of congregationss whose Web site is hosted through...	
A congregation-owned internet account	37%
Their denomination or branch	20%
A congregation member's donation of the space	15%
An Internet service in exchange for advertising	8%
A faith-related group, but not their denomination	7%
Other	13%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project
Congregational Survey, Nov.-Dec. 2000

revisited the site, the pop-up screen offered a service to find old high-school friends. Apparently, Angelfire runs a variety of ads through its pop-up windows regardless of whether the client is a church or more secular kind of institution.

Web space was also provided by denominations and by organizations that appeared to exist solely to provide Web services for congregations. One very active church body in this regard is the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), United Methodist Church. Of the initial 20,000 congregational Web addresses we collected, over 3,000 were part of the gbgm-umc.org domain. Netministries.com and Forministry.com offer free, template-based Web pages to congregations who might not otherwise have the means or the expertise to post their own sites.

One particularly intriguing domain, now defunct, was www.housesofworship.net, or www.hows.net. None of the congregations with URLs under these domains still had existing pages. When we explored the links to the URLs on the homepage of this screen, we were led to either clickheretofind.com, a tenacious commercial site that features online casinos and aggressive marketing pop-up windows, or to http://search.vu/christian.html, a Christian search engine, marketing window, and dating service.

The Internet's role in community building

Web sites and email are making a difference in congregational life. Fully 83% of respondents noted that their Web sites had helped congregational life "some" or "a great deal," and 81% agree that at some level, email has helped improve the spiritual life of the congregation.

These general sentiments can also be understood in particular contexts. We analyzed the use of the Internet by churches and synagogues along four demographic lines. First, we looked at how religion and denomination corresponded to some activities. We divided the congregation into three main groups: Christian churches (which made up the large majority of respondents to our survey), Jewish synagogues (91 of which responded to the survey), and Unitarian Universalist churches (74 of which responded). Second, we analyzed the responses based on the size of the congregation's budget. Third, we looked at the relationship between the Web site's function and the overall Internet connectivity of the congregation. Respondents could choose one of three options on this. If they felt that less than 30% of the congregation members have Internet access, they claimed had "low" congregational connectivity. "Average" connectivity fell in the 31%-50% range, and "high" connectivity came when more than 50% of the congregation has Internet access. Finally, we looked at the changing size of the congregation, which we discovered by asking each respondent to say whether membership had grown, shrunk, or remained the same in the past three years.

The best-funded churches and synagogues with the most-wired congregations were the most likely to report that their Web sites had helped the congregation's spiritual life. Fully 91% of the churches with budgets over $500,000 said the Web site had helped, compared to 78% of the churches with budgets under $150,000. Similarly, 90% of the high-access congregations say their Web site helped the church's spiritual life, compared to 67% of those with low access. Finally, congregations with well-established Web sites (those in operation for more than two years) were more likely than those with newer Web sites to report that the site had aided the congregation's spiritual life.

When it comes to the impact of email on the life of the faith community, one surprising finding is that congregations with increasing *or* decreasing membership are equally impressed with what email does for their faith communities. Improved communications between congregational staff and members due to email is more noted among congregations that have grown (94%) or decreased (92%) in size than for congregations whose membership has remained stable (79%). The level of Internet access in the congregation, of course, is also a major factor influencing their satisfaction with email. Some 90% of high-access congregations express pleasure with email's role in their community, compared to 62% of congregations with lower levels of Internet access among members. An example of how email improves spiritual life came from a Conservative synagogue whose Webmaster noted that email is used at times to inform members of a death in the congregation, and to ask for volunteers to sit with the body and pray with the family.

The most frequently cited use of these congregational Web sites was to attract new visitors. Furthermore, the most prevalent accomplishment of Web sites is to bring in visitors and new members. One small, new church noted at all of its new members first learned of the church through its Web page. Another church noted that it was rebuilding after going into decline 10 years ago, and that the Web site was helping bring in new visitors. In addition, a small number of congregations say their Web pages were important in bringing in new clergy.

Many congregations also noted that their sites have allowed former members to stay in touch. This is particularly common among sites that serve military families. A few churches even note that if they are slow in updating the site or posting the most recent sermon, old members are quick to write and point this out.

Although most sites are focused on serving a single congregation, a small number noted that they exist to serve disperse populations who are more readily reachable on the Web than elsewhere. These included sites that serve Messianic Jews (www.mjaa.org), gays and lesbians (MotherFlash.com), and the deaf (Calvary Lutheran Church for the deaf at http://www.ioweb.com/calvary/home.html.) One Lutheran site focuses on reaching Gypsies throughout the world (http://www.newlifeforthegypsies.org/).

The features of congregation Web sites

Most congregations responding to our survey indicate that the primary function of their Web sites is to promote their presence in a community and support their basic faith and worship activities. These Web sites are created principally to serve the local needs of the faith community. The three most common features of congregational Web sites are content that encourages visitors to attend services, faith texts including mission statements and sermons, and links to denominational and faith-related Web sites. "The site is used primarily to introduce us to a community which is 75% unchurched and who don't know what goes on in a church," said one of the respondents to the survey.

The next most important Web site features are those that enhance the spiritual and organizational life of the congregation. They include links to scripture studies and devotional material, schedules of activities, photos of congregational events, youth group material, and links to sites that assist with congregational administration, such as national associations for the clergy.

Less than a third of the sites have features that perform outreach functions to the local community or wider world. Some 33% of the respondents said their sites contained links to

What Congregations Do With Their Web Sites		
The percent of responding congregations that say their Web site…	*Currently offers this feature*	*May offer this feature in the future*
Encourages visitors to attend their church	83%	9%
Posts mission statements, sermons, or other text concerning faith	77%	12%
Links to denomination and faith-related sites	76%	11%
Links to scripture studies or devotional material	60%	18%
Posts schedules, meeting minutes, internal communications for the church	56%	15%
Posts photos of congregational events	50%	29%
Posts youth group material	44%	27%
Links to sites that assist with congregational administration, such as national associations for the clergy	40%	8%
Links to community sites such as local media, government, or festivals	33%	16%
Has material promoting missionary/evangelical work	31%	15%
Seeks ushers and volunteers for congregational work	19%	14%
Provides space for prayer requests	18%	22%
Solicits volunteers for projects outside the congregation such as soup kitchens or shelters	15%	14%
Posts material on non-faith related services in the community such as after-school programs	15%	12%
Posts information on volunteer needs in the community	13%	15%
Has a sign-up feature for classes/programs	8%	21%
Has material promoting legislative or social justice action	9%	11%
Allows online fundraising	5%	7%
Webcasts worship services	4%	12%
Provides discussion space for study or prayer groups	3%	13%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Congregational Survey, Nov.-Dec. 2000

community sites such as the local media, government agencies, or local activities like festivals and 31% had material promoting missionary or evangelical work by congregation members.

The least common Web site features were an eclectic mixture. They included space for prayer requests, community-based activities such as volunteer work outside the congregation or legislative or social justice activities, technically sophisticated activities such as Webcasts, and sensitive activities such as online fundraising.

When we examined the Web site features along the different demographic lines, we saw that several of our findings were intuitive: Christian sites were more likely than Jewish or Unitarian sites to promote missionary and evangelical work. Congregations with high levels of Internet access were more likely to use email in communications between clergy and congregations, or between committee members. Yet other findings were surprising. Congregations whose membership is changing, either increasing *or* decreasing, in general showed greater adoption of Web site features and email than did congregations whose membership has remained stable for at least three years.

Here is a rundown of the major activities on congregational Web sites:

Visitors invited to attend. Fully 83% of the responding congregations, regardless of faith, budget, the congregation's level of access, or the growth status said features to attract visitors were part of their sites. Many said new visitors had come into their midst after learning of the church or synagogue through its Web site. One small, new church noted that all of its new members first learned of the church through its Web page. Another church noted that it was rebuilding after going into decline 10 years ago, and that the Web site was helping bring in new visitors. Congregations note that they get calls from visitors who just moved to an area and first went hunting online for the names of local parishes. Some say they hear from families who have gone searching online before they move to an area in quest of finding a new church home. One synagogue noted that its site has prompted calls from people asking if they can visit even if they are not Jewish.

Of course, one reason this type of information is so readily available on congregational Web sites is that it is easy and inexpensive to post. Service times, directions to the church or temple, and welcome material is generally static content – it does not require revision or maintenance once it is posted. Some of the Webmasters at these congregations were frustrated by the lack of time and resources available to them to institute other Web site features. Thus, it is easy to see why many felt that welcoming material gave them the most bang for the buck.

Faith-related text. We asked congregations if their sites contained material such as mission statements, sermons, and other faith-related content and 77% said they did. This kind of information was most prevalent among Unitarian Universalist congregations (92%). This makes some sense because the basic precepts of Unitarian Universalism are probably less well known than those of Christianity and Judaism, and the web site offers an opportunity to explain those beliefs.

Links to denominational and other faith-related sites. About 76% of respondents said their sites provided links to other Internet sites related to their faiths. There were no great variations in the incidence of this feature when it came to a congregation's religious affiliation, budget level, or access level of the congregation. In addition to making pages more interesting, links are easy to create and do not require frequent maintenance,

particularly when they relate to material as timeless as the basic beliefs of different religions and denominations. That may be one of the primary reasons such links are so popular.

Links to scripture study or devotional material. Some 60% of congregations provide links to devotional material or information that assists in scripture study. From the comments we received, we know that these resources are used both for the personal benefit of individuals who use them, and for the preparation of worship services and religious-school activities.

Internal communications. Some 56% of our respondents say they use their Web sites to publish the schedule, calendar, and weekly bulletins. This material is most prevalent (63%) on the Web sites of high-budget congregations (those over $500,000). This content was frequently cited as the most popular and well-read part of congregational Web sites. One congregation noted that it gets 10 times its normal traffic on Friday nights because younger church members like to check for service times and other activities over the weekend.

Photos of congregational events. Photos of congregational events are a means of providing a service for congregation members and promoting the congregation to the community. Overall, 50% of respondents said their Web sites posted photos of congregational events. High budget congregations (60%) were more likely than low budget (42%) to post photos, and Unitarian congregations (33%) were less likely than others (49%) to do so. One Unitarian congregation noted that its policy of asking permission of every person involved before posting photographs kept such postings rather low.

Youth group material. The popularity of the Internet with young people, coupled with general fears concerning the material available to youth at other places on the Internet, suggests why many congregational sites are eager to provide interactive material for their youth. One church noted that such material "greatly increases youth participation, since they live on the Web." Some 44% of our respondents said that their sites do contain youth group material and activities. Wealthier congregations appear more eager – and able – to do so. Some 61% of congregations with budgets over $500,000 provide youth material, compared to 30% of congregations with budgets under $150,000.

Material to promote missionary/evangelical work. As noted already, this is primarily the domain of Christian sites (35%), although a handful of Jewish congregations (3%) and Unitarian congregations (7%) also include it as a feature. Among Christian sites, it is almost twice as prevalent in high-budget congregations (47%) as low budget (28%). It is also most prevalent among Fundamental (48%) and Greek Orthodox (44%) respondents, and least prevalent among Ecumenicals (25%) and Roman Catholics (22%).

"Evangelism" may have different meanings from church to church, so it is expected that it would manifest itself in different ways online. For some churches, simply inviting visitors to participate in worship and fellowship may constitute evangelism. Other congregational sites take evangelism further, inviting cyber-visitors to take steps of repentance and commitment. One church noted that its prayer section offers an opportunity for evangelism, particularly to non-Christians who write in to request prayer.

Prayer requests. Space for prayer requests is not a widely adopted feature. Just 18% of these respondents offered a feature like this on their Web sites. It is a relatively popular feature of Christian sites (21%) rather than Jewish (2%). None of the Unitarian Universalist sites said they provided such information on their Web site. It is possible that many sites are reluctant to encourage prayer requests online because they want to protect the privacy of those who are experiencing difficulty. At times, these types of requests might be better handled in email.

However, churches that do accept prayer requests have encountered unanticipated opportunities for outreach and ministry. One noted that it had linked with prayer sites from other churches, so that it could now pray for "thousands of hurting people." Such opportunities also appear when churches receive prayer requests from non-members, and one church noted that most of its prayer requests come from non-Christian countries.

Volunteers and service. Most congregations need volunteers for church or temple functions and for community programs such as soup kitchens and fundraisers. Web sites are not yet a prime communication tool in this matter; just 15% include these goals. As with the creation of prayer chains, this may be an activity that many feel is better left to the telephone or in-person conversation. However, some congregations report reaping benefits from posting such material on their site. One church piqued the interest of teenagers who were not members but who wanted to join a mission trip a Mexico. Another site received a message from someone in Grenada, which led the church to head up a clothing drive to send assistance. Yet another provided overnight accommodations for a youth group visiting from out of town. Someone in the group had contacted the church office after finding its site.

In a related question, we asked congregations whether their sites advocated legislative or social justice action. Just 9% of all sites did this, though the Unitarian Universalist sites (32%) were most likely to do so. One church noted that it had received calls from non-members who were interested in its social justice projects.

A few congregations support cyber-activists by providing links to the Hunger Site (http://www.thehungersite.com). Just by clicking on the site, visitors can ensure the donation of food to hungry areas of the world, and on the site can learn more about what they can do to abate hunger.

Pages to sign up for classes or programs. Congregations are much less likely to have two-way communication features on their Web sites than one-way broadcast features. Only 8% of Web sites provided sign-up capacity to their members. High budget congregations (19%) were more likely than low budget (4%) to use this feature, and, controlling for budget, Jewish congregational sites were more likely than Christian or Unitarian Universalist to offer it. We did not receive any comments that would shed light on how the availability of this feature affected congregational life.

Live services. When broadband services are widely deployed, it is possible that many congregations will provide live sound and video feeds to allow meetings, discussion, and worship participation for far-flung participants. These interactive features are virtually unknown now. Fewer than 5% of even the wealthiest congregations provide live Webcasts

of services, or two-way discussion space for prayer or study groups. A few comments, however, suggest that one-way Webcasting is more successful than two-way communications. Relatives in Israel watched a Bat Mitzvah ceremony in California, and former members now overseas were able to "attend" regular worship services at their old church. However, the only comment we received concerning chat functions remarked that the feature had seen "little use."

Online fundraising. In an age where people are becoming used to making purchases and even political donations online, the idea of online fundraising for congregational fundraising has not taken off. Only 5% of congregational Web sites reported having online fundraising. There are several potential reasons for this. Most of these faith communities wanted to provide a welcoming site for potential visitors without leaving the implication that they had created the Web site for the purpose of expanding the donor pool. It is also true, though, that many congregations do not want to incur the expense of creating a secure-server environment for cyber-stewardship. Fully 87% of respondents noted that they had no plans for or had never considered adding fundraising to their sites; that is higher than the rejection rate for any other feature.

Of the sites that do engage in online fundraising, only about 1 in 5 actually take only credit card contributions or pledges. Nearly one-third merely mention an on-going fundraising or stewardship drive (often in the form of on-line bulletins or newsletters) or provide information on who to contact regarding making a donation.

The most common direct fundraising technique emerges from Internet entrepreneurship. Sites can help members find books or music of interest by providing links to Amazon.com or another vendor, which then remits to the congregation a portion of the purchases made through their site. One third of sites with fundraising features used this model, which provides members with merchandise they want and the congregation with an extra revenue stream.

Other special features. In the course of the study, we have learned of several Web site features that were not easily placed in the categories about which we were asking. Some congregations have adopted Web tools in quite individualistic and ingenious ways. A few are listed below:

- Catholic parishes in Mobile, Alabama use the rcamobile.org domain include links to a hurricane tracking service on their sites: [http://rcamobile.org/hurricane.html].
- A Methodist Church in California notes in small print on its front page that, in order to prevent injuries, it makes free gun locks available to the public: [http://www.gbgm-umc.org/fumcv].
- One church offers a feature that generates graphics and site navigation tools for the deaf: [http://www.ioweb.com/calvary/home.html].
- Churches with schools on their premises post school closing notices during bad weather [see, for example, http://www.mkorshalom.org].

- A synagogue in Tulsa, Oklahoma includes a link titled "Move to Tulsa", which provides enthusiastic information on the Jewish community in Tulsa: [http://uahc.org/congs/ok/ok004/].
- A Methodist Church in Ohio offers a "random encouragement generator" on its front page, which provides brief messages of encouragement to visitors: [http://www.gbgm-umc.org/cosumc/].
- A Maryland church that suffered the murder of its priest this summer used its site to maintain communications with the congregation, and posted a memorial page that includes tributes from the community and news clippings that track the story through the eventual arrest of a suspect: [http://members.aol.com/setonpage/Welcome.htm].

The next wave of development in congregational Web sites

We asked respondents to tell us what kind of features they might add to their Web sites. In many cases the features being considered were those that would give more information about the basic life of the congregation and its activities. The least likely add-ons were those that related to outreach to the wider community, interactive features, and those that involved transactions.

Congregations hope to include the following features on their sites in the future:

- 29% said they hoped to post photos of congregation events
- 27% hoped to post youth group material
- 22% hoped to provide space for prayer requests
- 21% hoped to include a sign-up feature for classes and programs
- 18% hoped to include links to scripture studies or devotional material
- 16% hoped to include links to community sites such as local media, government agencies, or community events like festivals
- 15% hoped to post schedules of events, meeting minutes, and other internal communications
- 15% hoped to post material promoting missionary or evangelical work
- 15% hoped to post information on volunteer needs in their community
- 14% hoped to include a feature to solicit ushers and volunteers for congregational work
- 13% hoped to provide discussion space for study and prayer groups
- 12% hoped to post mission statements, sermons and other text concerning faith
- 12% hoped to begin Webcasting services
- 12% hoped to post material on non-faith matters related to services in the community such as after-school programs
- 11% hoped to link to denomination and faith-related sites
- 11% hoped to include material promoting legislative and social justice action
- 9% hoped to include material inviting visitors to attend
- 7% hoped to create online fundraising features

The darker side of the Internet
Very few of the congregations that responded to us had problems with their Web sites. Fully 90% said they had experienced no problems at all. About 8% of the sites said they had experienced problems with their Internet service provider and a mere 9 out of the 1,309 respondents said they had experienced problems with hackers – that is less than 1% of the respondent population.

Still, a small number of the respondents sounded some familiar and bedeviling complaints. Several noted that their Web site had not generated any new enthusiasm or any new activity at church. A few noted with sadness that some of the features of the Web site had hardly received any traffic. Others said there was little congregational support for the Web site and that, in a few cases, a decision had been made to scale back or abandon the site. Several noted that it was hard to get anyone to update the Web site with new material.

Part 2: Use of email within congregations

Email use in these congregations has become a binding element for the faithful. In many cases, the impact is dramatic. The flow of email goes in all directions: 89% of the respondents said that the minister or rabbi uses email to communicate with members of the congregation and 45% said that was done a great deal. Fully 84% said congregation committee members used email to pass along information related to committee business, and 43% said that type of electronic communication was used a great deal. And 86% said that staffers and members of the congregation exchange emails; 42% said that happens frequently.

A few congregations noted that they maintain more than one email list, and that members can sign up for lists that pursue things that interest them. Yet others noted that email is more important to the congregation than is the Web site.

Among members, email is used for fellowship and faith activities, though there is a bit more of the former than the latter. Some 91% of respondents said the congregation members exchange email for fellowship purposes; 36% said this kind of exchange is done a great deal. And 87% of the respondents said that congregation members send email back and forth to support each other spiritually or to share spiritual concerns. About a third (33%) said that happened a great deal.

In addition to intra-congregational emailing, members also frequently reach out to other faith communities. Some 82% of respondents have congregation members or clergy who use email to connect with members of other congregations on spiritual issues; 25% of them say this happens a great deal.

The results of these email flows are evident in the spiritual life of the faith community. Some 81% of the respondents said the use of email has helped the spiritual life of the congregation and 35% say that the use of email has helped a great deal. Fully 91% say that the use of email has helped congregation members and staffers stay more in touch – 51% say email has helped a great deal. And 63% of them believe that the use of email has helped the

congregation connect with the surrounding community to some extent. Some 17% say email has substantially helped in that kind of outreach.

As with Web-uses that require two-way communication rather than passive information distribution, use of email within congregations is tied to the congregation's level of Internet access. While high-budget congregations and congregations with changing membership reported higher use of and satisfaction with email, the effect of Internet access levels throughout the congregations was always the most telling variable. Jewish and Unitarian congregations, which reported having higher access levels across the board than did Christian congregations, also report higher usage on email. However, those differences generally disappear when looking only at high-access Christian congregations.

The network effect

The more congregation members with Internet access, the more emailing there is...

The percent of respondents who say email is used this way in the congregation	Access		
	High	Medium	Low
Email is sent among committee members	97%	84%	54%
Email is sent by congregation members for fellowship purpose	95%	92%	76%
Staff sends email to the congregation	94%	95%	70%
Clergy send email to the congregation	94%	89%	78%
Email is sent by congregation members for spiritual purposes	90%	90%	76%
...and the more likely it is that email has helped the congregation.			
The percent who say use of email has			
Helped congregational staff and members stay in touch	97%	93%	76%
Helped the spiritual life of congregation	90%	81%	63%
Helped connect congregation with community	72%	61%	49%

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Church Survey, Nov.-Dec. 2000
Note: High access means more than 50% of congregation has Internet access.
Medium access means 30%-50% of the congregation has Internet access.
Low access means less than 30% of the congregation has Internet access.

Part 3: How congregational leaders use the Internet

Much of the journalism on religion and the Internet to date points out that the Internet gives the site visitor a sense of anonymity – that seekers, particularly those not deeply connected to particular churches or synagogues, may be more willing to go to the Internet than to actually set foot in a church or temple. While anonymity is an advantage online, church-wary folk are hardly the only ones who venture into cyberspace for religious purposes.

Our survey provided an opportunity to ask those filling out the questionnaire to talk about their own uses of the Internet. They were mostly ministers and rabbis, other major officials, or congregational Webmasters. We asked them to tell us what they did when they surfed the Web for spiritual content.

The comments of respondents illustrated that the Internet is used for an array of purposes. Not surprisingly, many indicated they looked at other congregational sites for ideas, or they looked for clip art, music, or other elements available to download to their own sites. Individuals wrote to us that they do Biblical research, look up information about other denominations and faiths, seek out devotional material, and even listen to religious radio online. Clergy participate in online groups with other clergy in which they discuss areas of common interest and provide feedback on sermons, and participate in prayer networks; they research biblical text and sermon resources. Youth leaders look for youth group ideas, music leaders frequent cyber-hymnals, and one respondent used the Web to find recipes for *prosphora*, loaves of bread used during the Orthodox Eucharist.

We asked participants to indicate whether they had done specific activities online. Their responses show a mix of goals, some seeking to further congregational worship and programs, and others for personal study or mediation.

What spiritual leaders do online		
Percent who go online to ...	*Ministers and rabbis*	*All respondents*
Find resources for worship	81%	61%
Do Bible or Torah research	77%	70%
Seek devotional resources	72%	65%
Find resources for education programs	72%	62%
Seek doctrinal information	59%	54%
Hunt for information on other denominations or faiths	57%	50%
Seek information on matters of faith	54%	49%
Find prayer material	40%	37%
Join faith discussion groups	33%	29%
Seek discipleship opportunities	29%	21%
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Church Survey, Nov.-Dec. 2000		

In addition, one-third of respondents noted that they found some resources on-line that they wish were available within their congregations. This finding may have particular relevance in light of current speculation as to whether it is possible for believers to have all their spiritual needs met online. George Barna, a social scientist who studies trends in religious and secular

culture, found that one out of six teenagers "expect to use the Internet as a substitute for their current church-based religious experience" within the next five years.[2]

A few churches used the term "cyber-member" in their comments to us, but they generally wrote that those who access worship via the Internet are elderly people who could not attend services, or previous members who had moved away but retain ties. If Barna's prediction is correct, and if teens can accurately predict their preferences five years down the road (two very big "ifs"), congregational sites may need to find ways to engage both the spiritual and financial interests of a new young breed of spiritually-minded surfers.

Part 4: A reference listing of some of the Web sites and features that caught our attention

This is not meant to be a "best practices" guide or a comprehensive listing of all the responses we got to our email solicitation. Rather, it is compilation of some of the sites and features that struck us as interesting:

A site that is meant to appeal to the "unchurched": http://www.lordofmercy.org

A site that promotes the church's preschool/daycare program: http://calvary-whitewater.org

A church that sends cyber-cards to keep visitors returning to the site while evangelizing those who receive them: http://ststephencatholic.org/

A site that serves a team of 12 part-time ministers serving four churches: http://MotherFlash.com [be sure to click on "CoonCam: Watch Tippet the blind raccoon"]

A site that has a graphics and slide show about itself: http://www.gastontogether.org/plchurch

A site that offers a virtual tour of the church: http://www.atlgoc.org

A site that streams video and audio samples of its services: http://www.fcchurch.com

A site that includes a photographic history of the congregation, which is about to celebrate its sesquicentennial: http://www.emmaus-racine.org

A site that uses a Story of the Week to keep people coming back: http:// www.ohills-ag.org

A site that includes an activity page for children to answer questions: http://www.gbgm-umc.org/calvary-villapark/

A site that solicits prayer requests and where many of them come from outside the United States: http://www.harrisonumc.org

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[2] http://216.87.179.136/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=9&Reference=E

A site that uses inspirational humor and a Christian link for email cards:
http://www.gbgm-umc.org/trinitysa/

A site that lists hymns that have been sung recently with links to a "cyber hymnal":
http://members.aol.com/FBArlMA/MW1.html

A site that has inspirational and motivational messages: http:// www.shem.net

A site with a prayer list: http://www.gbgm-umc.org/asumc

A site with a visitor's page with responses to frequently asked questions and is notably
welcoming to gays: http://ovuuc.omd.uua.org

A site with extensive traffic from around the world, perhaps because it is the home of a
Lutheran "hymnal project": http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/zion.htm

A site of a small, rural church that was started in order to sell church compact disks and
tapes: http://eastcraftsbury.presbychurch.net

A site in Maui, Hawaii that draws attention from tourists looking for a place to worship:
http://www.maui.net/~lutheran

A site that emphasizes a medieval garden: http://www.ilconline.org

A site that emphasizes ministry to young adults: http://www.fpcmaitland.org

Methodology

This report is based on the findings of an online survey of 1,309 congregations. Roughly
12,000 congregations with Web sites and email addresses were invited participate in the
survey, which ran from November 21 to December 8. Congregations received one invitation
and one follow-up reminder, and were offered individualized summaries of their own Web
site use compared to other congregations of their size or denomination as an incentive to
participate.

As with all studies that require sampling Internet pages, the results of this survey must be
considered descriptive rather than scientifically generalizable. A scientifically valid survey
requires that a sample of subjects be drawn from the entire population. There is no single
comprehensive listing of Web sites from which to draw a sample, let alone a listing of
congregational Web pages. Some surveys of Internet sites have used random page generators
to mimic a random sample of pages. But such generators cannot limit the pages it produces
to any specific type of page, so that method was not suitable for this study.

The framework for identifying Christian congregation Web sites was drawn from the Web
sites of Christian denominations with over 1 million members, as reported in the 2000
edition of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.* Many, but not all of these sites
provided links to the sites of member congregations. Sites of non-denominational

congregations, as well as congregations whose denominations did not provide congregational links, were drawn from the generic portal Yahoo and the Christian portal Goshen. Jewish congregations were drawn from umbrella sites for Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism; we could not find a similar resource for Orthodox Judaism.

We could not find sufficient numbers of Islamic or Buddhist congregational sites to include in this study, but we hope to incorporate them into future surveys.

Thus, congregations in these religions, denominations, and branches were solicited:

- Jewish – Conservative
- Jewish - Reform
- Jewish – Reconstructionist
- Unitarian
- Roman Catholic
- Southern Baptist
- United Methodist
- The Church of God in Christ
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Presbyterian USA
- Lutheran Church Missouri Synod
- Assemblies of God
- African Methodist Episcopalian (AME)
- Episcopal
- Greek Orthodox
- American Baptist Churches USA
- Pentecostal Assembly of the World
- United Church of Christ
- AME Zion

These sites provided listings for about 20,000 congregations. Invitations to participate in the survey were emailed to only 12,000 because many URLs were old, domains that once served congregations had changed to new uses, or the sites did not contain an email address. This last consideration may in particular have skewed the sample toward wealthier congregations, as many of the sites that used free web space and design services did not have email addresses.