

Nearly two-thirds of wired American adults surf Net for spiritual reasons_50304

April 30, 2004

Posted: 5/03/04

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WASHINGTON (RNS)-Nearly two-thirds of American adults with Internet access have used it for spiritual or faith-related reasons, according to a recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life project.

The 82 million Americans who use the Internet for religious activities represent 64 percent of all wired adults in the United States.

The study found one-third of U.S. Internet users have sent or received e-mail with religious content or spiritual greeting cards, or go online to read current religion news. Others look for information about religious services and holidays.

The trend is about the same across different denominations, pollsters said.

"These practices are appealing to people across all of our categories of religion and spirituality, and across all levels of Internet use," the report said.

Half of the online faithful said they attend church at least once a week and 33 percent describe themselves as evangelicals. Most-69 percent-said they

use the Internet for personal spiritual growth, not for work related to their places of worship. Only 14 percent said they use the Internet to plan church-related meetings, which the report called surprising.

“The online faithful seem more interested in augmenting their traditional faith practices and experiences by personally expressing their own faith and spirituality, as opposed to seeking something new or different in the online environment,” the report said. “This is interesting, because many analysts have assumed that the Internet would make it more likely for people to leave churches in favor of more flexible options.”

Half of those who use the Internet for spiritual purposes are women, 83 percent are white and half are college-educated. They also are likely to be wealthy and between 30 and 49 years old.

A quarter of respondents said they look for information about other religious faiths online out of curiosity, with Catholics the least likely to go online for religious information.

The report said the study's results were surprising and its implications unclear.

“It is possible that those currently affiliated with religious institutions will maintain a foothold in both the online and offline worlds,” the report said. “On the other hand, we may see an integration occur between the two.”

The study surveyed 1,358 U.S. Internet users in November and December 2003. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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