

# Christian chat rooms may offer safer Internet alternatives

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Xianz.com  
bills itself  
as a  
Christian  
alternative  
to social  
networking  
websites  
like  
MySpace  
and  
Facebook

## Christian chat rooms may offer safer Internet alternatives

**By Hannah Elliott**

*Associated Baptist Press*

DALLAS (ABP)—The Internet can be a scary place, at least for the parents of teenagers flocking to social networking websites like MySpace and Facebook. Teens see them as places to keep up with friends and make new

ones online. But many parents imagine only faceless predators trolling chat rooms for unsuspecting teen victims.

Enter [Xianz.com](http://Xianz.com), a “social networking platform” that caters to a Christian crowd, offering some of the same socializing tools as MySpace but in what organizers call a “safe environment for teens.”

Xianz.com—pronounced “zans,” with the “x” representing the Greek initial for “Christ”—began at the end of 2005. Still in its beta mode—a high-tech trial run—the website has only about 4,500 members so far. But founders Robbie Davidson and Bob Hutchins see great things ahead.

Backed by a marketing company called Buzzplant and Praiz.com, the Nashville-based Xianz started in part in response to the bad press directed toward MySpace—vulnerability to predators, questionable postings, and the like.

“MySpace was really letting anything go,” Davidson said. “A lot of people are wanting a safe alternative.”



Thanks to pressure from school and law-enforcement officials, MySpace recently hired Hemanshu Nigam, director of consumer security outreach and child-safe computing at Microsoft, to oversee safety and privacy programs.

That’s quite a task for MySpace, which has more than 66 million users and gains 250,000 new ones each day. It’s the fourth-largest site on the net in terms of pages viewed, according to *Financial Times*.

For some competing websites, stats like those are intimidating. For the founders of Xianz.com, however, such staggering numbers only underscore the need for a safe Christian alternative.

Just last month, MySpace removed 200,000 “objectionable” profiles from its site in an effort to protect against predators and identity theft—especially for the teen users who tend to gravitate to networking sites.

The items removed involved “hate speech” or sex-related material, said Ross Levinson, head of the Internet division of News Corp, Rupert Murdoch’s media conglomerate, which bought MySpace for \$580 million.

Davidson said Xianz uses safeguards like invite-only login rights and chat rooms segregated by age.

Some observers see such safeguards as only a minor impediment to hackers with less-than-charitable motivations.

“Sounds to me like an open invitation for pagan hackers to have some fun,” said blogger Alan Hartung, general editor of the Christian website theooze.com and former host of the radio show, *A Different Perspective*.

There’s another problem with Christian-alternative sites, say Hartung and others. “Xianz does not appeal to me, nor do I want my children to blog their lives inside an artificially created goldfish bowl that only seems like it will be safe from undesirables ... namely non-Xianz,” Hartung wrote.

Ken Satterfield, a father and marketing specialist, said anonymity of the Internet causes people to divulge personal information they ordinarily wouldn’t share. The Christian label on Xianz.com or Swordwalk, another Christian site, causes some people to let down their otherwise careful guard against strangers, he said.

“There is a tremendous freedom in sharing information with a faceless person via the Internet,” Satterfield, marketing coordinator at the Missouri-based Baptist newspaper *Word & Way*, said in an e-mail interview. “The acceptance found when sharing personal information online that you wouldn’t do in person and (the) ability to find an accepting audience is why good marriages break up and hate groups thrive online.”

As a parent, Satterfield said, he also struggles with the choice between shielding his children from potentially harmful media and letting them learn how to navigate the world on their own.

“I welcome a safe environment for my boys, but ... I think there is too much of a tendency to isolate ourselves behind the church walls,” he said. “The key is developing young adults who can interact with the world in a discerning way and who avoid going too deep in uncharted waters without a parent or trusted adult, teacher or student minister.”

Contrary to popular belief, the site organizers say, Xianz.com is not a “Christians-only” site. Davidson said any and all users are welcome, as long as they abide by site rules. Site rules were not posted on user pages at the time of this writing.

Xianz.com’s “growth-rate has been absolutely incredible,” Davidson said, and organizers plan to unveil an updated version May 25.

Davidson said the lack of questionable advertisements is reason enough for Christians and non-Christians alike to want to join. New users find the site “refreshing,” he said. “The advertising is enough to get a lot of people interested.”

Most of Xianz.com is accessible by invitation only, and it is geared toward providing Christians with “a good time of fellowship,” Davidson said. Nonetheless, he and Hutchins—who met while working together at another Christian website—concede users with malicious motives might be able to

access the site.

New technology, which allows dynamic content updates and real-time conversations, separates Xianz.com from other networking sites, Davidson stressed. Mood tags for users and welcome notes to new members lend a sense of community and personality, he said.

The Christian site also offers similar services to MySpace—customized profiles, music, video clips, instant messaging and blogs.

It's the bloggers, though, who have spoken out most vehemently against the new site. While some welcome it as a place for Christians to interact in an inviting atmosphere, others decry it as a sorry excuse for marketing to an unsuspecting Christian crowd.

Some, like the bloggers at Bene Diction, said it was inevitable that a Christian social networking site would appear on the heels of the MySpace success. In a recent post on Bene Diction, a blogger wrote that, while social networking plays a "critical" role in "our busy world," faith communities should not charge money for "righteous MySpace wannabes."

"The sad thing is the market is there, the fear is there, the money is there, the self-righteousness is there, all offered up as healthy alternatives," one blogger wrote. "Sooner rather than later, the difficulties any social networking site deals with will also be there. Technology is only an extension of real life, and people are going to be hurt."

Counselor Vicki Hollon first got involved in MySpace as a way to shield her 17-year-old son from that possible hurt. She thought if she created her own MySpace page, she could keep closer tabs on her son's online activities. Now, all her grown children have pages as well, and the family—with members in New York, Kentucky and Illinois—uses those pages as a way to communicate.

Hollon, executive director at the Wayne Oates Institute in Louisville, Ky., said sites like MySpace can provide healthy ways to express creativity and individuality. While she doesn't think there's anything "inherently evil" with either a secular or a Christian chat room, she said the Christian affiliation will do nothing in itself to exclude adult predators.

The "bottom line is going to depend on who is present," Hollon said via e-mail. "Do the youth have friends, or are they isolated and searching for friends? Who is facilitating the site? Who is setting and supervising ground rules? (Xianz.com) can be used for good or bad. It depends on who feeds the vacuum."

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