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ON THE WEB

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Congregations Put Their Faith in the Net

By JEFFREY SELINGO

TINY Harrison Methodist Church in Pineville, N.C., welcomes visitors from around the world, sometimes several times a week. They're web surfers from as far away as New Zealand who request prayers by using a standard form on the church's site. The prayer request is then zapped to a church volunteer, who offers a prayer and then writes a personal reply to the visitor.

Such spiritual outreach wouldn't be possible for a church the size of Harrison without the Internet, said Bill Sample, the church's volunteer Webmaster, who suggested starting the site five years ago. The church has 700 members and an annual budget of \$285,000.

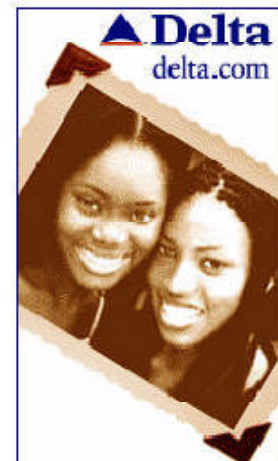
"We're a church in Pineville, N.C.," Mr. Sample said, "and now we could reach out to people in Indiana or India who are dealing with divorce or a loved one diagnosed with an illness."

The Pineville church is not alone in the religious cyberworld. A report released last week by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that churches and religious leaders were using the Internet in many of the same ways as everyone else: to post information, recruit new members and communicate with colleagues around the world.

"I knew going into this that some churches were going online and so we would be finding some degree of usefulness," said Lee Rainie, the director of the Pew project, which studies the social impact of the Internet. "But it was surprising to me how intense the response was and how broadly churches are using the Internet."

The group surveyed 1,309 congregations in 49 states that responded to an online survey. Eighty three percent of respondents said that the Internet had helped congregational life. The 471 rabbis and ministers who responded to the survey said they used the Internet like a vast library, retrieving information for services or educational programs. In particular, the study found that e-mail had helped church and clergy members stay in touch.

The Rev. Don Stein, pastor of Calvary Lutheran Church in Whitewater, Wis., said e-mail had made it easier to reach students at the nearby University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. Mr. Stein said students on the campus regularly sent e-mail to him about spiritual issues, life concerns or general religious



They were messy.

The image shows the Delta logo with the text 'Delta delta.com' in the bottom right corner.

questions.

"Before e-mail, it was really difficult to talk to students because the dorms would be locked or they wouldn't be there," Mr. Stein said. "Nothing is as good as talking to them face to face, of course, but students are much more comfortable with e-mail."

Students, as well as other newcomers to the college town, also discover the church through the Web before they arrive, Mr. Stein said. Mr. Rainie said that the "church shopping experience" seemed to be migrating from the Yellow Pages to the Web. "It's quite appealing to people that they could get a sense of the church architecture and minister online," he added.

Most church Web sites have a simple design, perhaps reflecting the ad hoc nature of their creation, which is usually by one or two volunteers, the survey found. Many church sites post sermons and bulletins, link to faith-related sites or share photos of congregational events. But some church sites have become a lot more sophisticated.

First Community Church in Columbus, Ohio, for instance, offers streaming video and audio samples of its services. The Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Annunciation in Atlanta offers a virtual tour of the church and welcomes visitors with organ music. St. Stephen Catholic Church near St. Petersburg, Fla., has an e-mail directory of members and offers electronic religious greeting cards.

Over all, the survey had its limitations, Mr. Rainie said. It's not scientifically accurate, he said, because there is no single registry of congregational Web sites from which to draw a random sample. Major religious organizations like the Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist churches do not operate portals listing church Web sites. As a result, the survey is skewed somewhat toward the United Methodist and Lutheran churches, which were easier to find and made up about 52 percent of the sample.

Although individual church sites may generate very little traffic — some had only a few hundred visitors in the last year — the audience for online spiritual growth is immense, according to an ongoing phone survey by the Pew Internet project. Some 21 percent of Internet users, between 19 million and 20 million people, have searched online for religious or spiritual information. That's more people than have used online banking (18 percent), participated in online auctions (15 percent) or used online dating services (15 percent).

But even religious leaders who use the Internet say they have mixed feelings about it as a spiritual instrument. The Rev. Charles Emery, pastor at Calvary United Methodist Church in Villa Park, Ill., compared the Internet with televangelism. "We have to guard ourselves so we don't allow the tool to become the means of really connecting," he said. "Church is not a spectator sport. It really is a community."

Mr. Emery said the Web could furnish an important community link. For instance, several members of the Villa Park church spend the winter in Florida and the Web site allows them to keep up to date on church happenings, Mr. Emery said.

"It's the older people getting much more caught up in this," Mr. Emery said of his 240 church members. "I'm not sure young people are hitting the church sites that often. They're probably downloading music."

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