

More and more Baptists are using online dating sites to find the one

Plenty of dating sites available, but those using them need to navigate with care

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In today's fast-paced, technology-based world, there is no end to the number of things you can accomplish online.

From the comfort of your living room, you can shop, order take-out, arrange your next vacation, pay your bills and...find a mate?

Not convinced that people—especially Christians—are looking for their future spouses online? Let's take a look at the numbers.

Eighty percent of Americans say that online dating is a good way to meet people, according to Pew Research, and 15 percent actually have used an online dating site. With more than 70 percent of Americans claiming to be Christian, it stands to reason that a good portion of the 80 percent and some percentage of the 15 percent are believers—even if not everyone who claims to be is, in fact, a Christian.

"The question isn't: Are you online dating? It's which site are you on?" said Sam Moorcroft, president and co-founder of ChristianCafe.com, an online dating site that boasts between 50,000 and 75,000 active members. Around since 1999, ChristianCafe.com is one of the earliest online dating sites, according to Moorcroft.

It begs the question: Can Christians really find love online?

While there are lots of opinions among Florida Baptists on the merits of online dating, most agree it's not a trend that will be going away any time soon. As a result, singles need to proceed into the online dating pool with eyes wide open to its inherent strengths and weaknesses.

Who's using online dating sites?

The website statisticbrain.com estimates that, in 2015, more than 49 million people in the United States had tried online dating, causing the industry to skyrocket into nearly a \$2 billion a year revenue-maker.

The largest growth has been with people who are between 18 and 24 years of age. Their usage has tripled since 2013. The second-biggest gain is at the other end of the age spectrum: Usage among adults between the ages of 55 and 64 has doubled during the same time.

While the proliferation of high-speed Internet connections and mobile apps bear some of the responsibility, people's changing views on the acceptability of the practice may be an even greater factor.

Stigma decreasing, concerns still abound

The stigma once attached to online dating and the people who do it has by and large begun to disappear.

The number of people who have checked out ChristianMingle, another popular dating site for believers, bears this out.

ChristianMingle allows you to interact on two levels. If you sign up for a free membership you can search for people and look at their profiles. But in order to communicate with someone, you have to become a paid subscriber. The Christian-centered online dating site says it has 120,000 subscribers, but more than 16 million people have signed up over the last six or seven years.

Michael Egan, CEO of Sparks Network, the company that owns ChristianMingle, has been in his role for a little more than a year. He said that when he became head of ChristianMingle, he reached out to pastors to find out just what they thought of the online dating phenomenon and discovered that "perception has changed dramatically."

"Four to five years ago they wanted to shy away because it didn't seem genuine



Paige Stewart and her husband, Stacey, met through eHarmony. They have two little girls and are members of First Baptist Church in Naples. (Meredith Black Photography)

TOP ONLINE DATING SITES USED BY CHRISTIANS

1. eHarmony
2. match.com
3. ChristianMingle
4. ChristianCafe.com
5. ChristianCrush.com

Source: singleroots.com

and authentic," Egan explained. "Now [pastors] are recognizing their congregations are using it, and it's popular."

Veronica Palmer, a member of McGregor Baptist Church in Fort Myers, is single and in her 50s. While her personal experience on ChristianMingle was not a positive one, it hasn't affected how she and her peers view online dating as a whole.

"There's no stigma for me and my friends because we have seen it work," she said. "I didn't meet nice, Christian guys, but some of my friends did."

Kris Swiatocho, director of The Singles Network Ministries, said that while there is not as much of a stigma attached to online dating as there once was, she still comes across people who are hesitant to admit that they met online.

"If you're embarrassed and it bothers you to tell someone you met the one you're dating online, that should indicate that's maybe not the right way to meet somebody," she said.

Despite its increasing popularity, some remain unconvinced of the merits of online dating.

One of the more obvious negatives, according to Swiatocho, is the focus on superficiality. Perusing pictures and personal profiles that highlight only positives and downplay or disregard negatives can cause people to value the wrong things.

"It's so much about the outside, and people don't get to know the inside," Swiatocho said. "They're looking for the needs



Melanie Limoges, left, met her husband, Sebastien, in an online chat room in 1994, and they were married in 1998. (Amy Mooney/Photography by Grace)

of the flesh instead of the needs of the heart."

The other big drawback for Swiatocho is the opportunity for people to be dishonest. Only knowing what the other person wants you to know about them can lead to a skewed or even completely false picture of a person is.

That was the experience of Paige Danielson, also a member of McGregor Baptist in Fort Myers. Like Palmer, she did not have a positive experience with online dating sites—calling the majority of men she met on one popular site "liars" who were only "looking for one thing."

Danielson went on to say she has "never heard of a good experience."

Swiatocho said that in 20 years of ministry, she knows of only two couples who met online and have gone on to have a lasting marriage.

While Swiatocho said she is not against online dating, per se, she thinks that people who use the sites run the risk of "getting ahead of God."

"It doesn't matter where you meet someone if your motives are right," she said. "But [online dating] can push you into a relationship with someone you don't know well enough to be in relationship with."

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR DATING ONLINE

- Do your homework on the various dating sites.
- Is there some kind of identity verification, marital status or background check they can make available?
- Talk by email first, then phone, going slow, building trust and a foundation.
- Ask for a recent photo.
- Group date first when possible.
- When it comes time to meet in person, meet in a public place.
- Bring a friend along for your date, double date or plan something shortly after with a friend.
- Take your cell phone. If you aren't the one driving, have cash for a cab/taxi/bus. If possible, drive separate.
- Make sure someone knows where you are and who you are meeting; have a plan to call them during the date.
- Date people who are local whenever possible; it makes it easier to visit their church, come along on groups dates, meet their family, friends, etc.
- Never tell them where you are staying or living and never go home with them after your first or even several dates.
- Date equally yoked.
- Be smart, go slow and wait on God.

Source: Kris Swiatocho, The Singles Network Ministries

found certain similarities between the online dating experience and a traditional date.

"It's a great tool, but in the end everything you have to be concerned with face-to-face you have to be concerned with online," he said.

While Bridwell is not currently on a dating site, he said that he would not be opposed to doing it again in the future.

"On a scale of 1 to 10, [my experience] was a 5," he said. "I met some cool people, and in the end I had just as much success as asking someone out in person."

Bridwell said that online dating offers definite advantages for people who might be shy and have a hard time approaching others in public as well as people who come from small communities or small churches.

"It's helpful for a lot of folks who may not have access to many social outlets for people of faith," he said.

Jim Terry, pastor of Tallahassee Biker Church, while single, has never used an online dating site himself. However, he has observed the experiences of friends and family members who have. He said that while it's likely you will come across some people who may be manipulative, he has seen some strong relationships come out of the online dating experience.

"It has its place in this world, but I think you can't be naïve about it," Terry said.

Egan, from ChristianMingle, said that in some ways, the online experience can be even safer than an in-person encounter.

"If you treat it right, it's much safer than meeting someone in the grocery store because you have a chance to communicate in an anonymous fashion for a while before you meet them in the real world," he said.

A tale of two marriages

Melanie Limoges met her husband, Sebastien, online in 1994 when most people were just figuring out the wonders of email. While in college, through an application known as Internet Relay Chat or IRC, Limoges began connecting with people all over the country and the world. A desire to keep up the French language skills she had learned in high school took her to a "French" chat room, where she encountered a young man from Canada named Sebastien.

"It was fun to chat with people from around the world and find out about different cultures," she said.

A friendship blossomed slowly into romance and the two eventually married.

Limoges said it's been interesting to observe how attitudes toward online dating have changed during their 18 years of marriage.

"At first it was so unusual that we felt a little embarrassed," she recalled. "We got married in '98, and by 2000 we would just laugh about it. We met online before everybody had their own website."

And while Limoges did not have what

some would call today's typical online dating encounter, the lessons she took away from her experience are still relevant.

"For me, I think the greatest benefit of an online relationship was that we had to learn to talk to each other," she said. "We couldn't depend on non-verbal cues or physical attraction."

Another benefit of online dating, according to Limoges, is the opportunity to meet someone you might not otherwise have had the opportunity to meet.

"What are the odds you're going to meet someone in your home church that you are going to marry and make a life with?" she asked.

Fast forward to 2008 and meet Paige Stewart. By this time, online dating had just begun to gain popularity. But there weren't as many sites to choose from, and especially not niche sites specifically for Christians. In August, then 32-year-old Stewart reluctantly decided to join eHarmony, but she had some reservations.

"At first it was pride," Stewart said. "Why couldn't I meet someone the normal way?"

Stewart said that while internet dating was starting to gain acceptance, it wasn't as prevalent as it is today and she wondered what other people would think about her taking this step in order to meet people.

Stewart noted that despite its popularity, there are still misconceptions about online dating that she encounters to this day.

"When I tell people how we met they say, 'No way. That really works?'" she said, also noting that while it worked for them it "might not be the thing that works for everybody."

Stewart firmly believes God's hand was in her online dating experience.

"God used eHarmony as a tool to bring us together," she said.

Now, six years later, Stewart and husband Stacey have two little girls and are serving the Lord at First Baptist Church in Naples. Looking back on her online experience, Stewart is thankful she met her husband this way.

"For me, the normal ways weren't working," she said. "God had another path for me."

Proceed with caution

Fans and critics alike agree that online dating should be approached with care.

Swiatocho advises to start with prayer. "Pray and see if this is what God wants you to do," she said. "If so, then pray about which site you should use. Pray through every step of the process"

Swiatocho recommends using sites that you have to pay to use because requiring payment can often screen out people who are on there for dishonest reasons. Having to fill out a long profile application can also be a deterrent.

Swiatocho also said that being truthful with your profile and in the picture you choose is important.

In our selfie-centered world, Bridwell said it can be hard to find truth in pictures. "I met two or three girls online and not one of them looked like their picture," he said. "It's not intentional, it's just how we take pictures today. But it doesn't really

ONLINE DATING STATISTICS (2015)

54,250,000
Total number of single people in U.S.

49,250,000
Total number of people in U.S. who have tried online dating

\$1,749,000,000
Annual revenue from the online dating industry

\$243
Average spent by dating site customer per year

18.5 months
Average length of courtship for marriages that met online

42 months
Average length of courtship for marriages that met offline

52.4
Percent of male online dating users

47.6
Percent of female online dating users

17
Percent of marriages in the past year in which the couple met on a dating site

20
Percent of current committed relationships that began online

71
Percent of people who believe in love at first sight

10
Percent of sex offenders who use online dating to meet people

What men lie most about online

Age, height, income
What women lie most about online

Weight, physical build, age
Source: statisticbrain.com

show you who they normally are."

In addition, Terry suggests a meticulous vetting process that gets your friends involved.

"There's an awful lot of information out there about people that you can find out pretty quickly," he said. "Having your friends vet the person makes a big difference."

Getting friends involved also adds a layer of accountability that can be valuable as the online dater examines motives and contemplates next steps.

"Many are so coy and subtle about it and don't tell friends and family until it's too late and you lose accountability about it," Bridwell said.

Swiatocho also counsels singles to identify a set of "non-negotiables" ahead of time so you can easily identify when it's time to extract yourself from a situation that's not right for you.

"Have your non-negotiables and don't compromise," she said. "If you're willing to compromise, do you know who you are in Christ?"

From this day forward ...

It seems online dating's foothold will only continue to grow.

"If you had asked me 20 years ago when Sebastien and I met, I would not have expected online dating to be so popular," Limoges said. "Now by the time kids are in middle school they have phones and access to social media. For this generation it seems like the logical progression."

Moorcroft at ChristianCafe.com predicts that online dating will account for 50 to 75 percent of marriages in the next generation.

"The future is online dating," he said. "The sites that cater to the communal part of humanity and give people the opportunity to connect will still be here in 20 years."

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