



# RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE

FAITHFUL VOICES ON SEXUALITY AND RELIGION

21 CHARLES STREET • WESTPORT, CT 06880 • 203-222-0055 • WWW.RELIGIOUSINSTITUTE.ORG

## Survey of Religious Professionals on Internet and Social Media Use

### Introduction

In the fall of 2012, the Religious Institute surveyed clergy in the Religious Institute database of progressive religious leaders regarding congregational and personal use of the Internet and social media, with a focus on sexuality issues. Three quarters of respondents were senior or solo pastors serving a congregation. Respondents were Unitarian Universalist (31%), United Church of Christ (12%), Episcopal Church (10%), Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (7%), Jewish Reform (6%), Metropolitan Community Church (5%), The United Methodist Church (4%), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (3%), and others.

### Widespread Internet and Social Media Use

All of the respondents (99%) consider themselves to be somewhat or highly knowledgeable about the Internet in general, with nearly as large a proportion (96%) considering themselves somewhat or highly knowledgeable about social media. Eight in ten report that their congregation has a Facebook page, and 92% have a freestanding web page. These freestanding web pages are being used to disseminate congregational information (97%), links to denominational resources (86%), newsletters (77%), and sermons (64%).

Far fewer are using other social media. Only 27% of congregations have a blog, only one in four (23%) are on Twitter, and only 20% have a YouTube Channel. Almost all congregations (94%) use email to communicate with their congregants, and 74% of congregations use Facebook posting. Only one in three (31%) use texting, and 27% use blogs to communicate. Social media is being used for congregational news (81%) and clergy interaction with congregants (68%), for reaching people outside of the congregation (53%), for members interacting with each other (43%), and for disseminating prayer requests (29%).

### Formal Policies or Religious Education Not Addressing New Media

Despite widespread clergy and congregational use of Internet and Facebook, only a minority of respondents report that their congregations have written policies governing these technologies in place. Less than ten percent of respondents reported current policies on congregational Facebook or Twitter account posting, social media during worship, sharing worship content online, friending policies for clergy or staff, or any policies around location-based services ("checking in"). Only 10% had policies governing youth and educator friending, and only one in six (17%) had policies governing tagging congregant photos. Only one in four had a written policy on cell phone use during worship services.

Congregations have also not educated their congregants about new technologies. Although almost half (43%) of clergy report that they have preached about the Internet and/or social media, only 12% of congregations have offered educational programs for youth or adults on safe Internet or social media use, only 11% have offered programs for parents on safe youth Internet or social media use, and just 2% have offered programs about online dating.

### **Concern about Congregant and Clergy New Media Use**

Nearly half of clergy reported being somewhat concerned (34%) or very concerned (15%) about congregant use of the Internet and/or social media. Many respondents report that they have provided pastoral counseling on a wide range of Internet-related sexuality issues. These include Internet-related couples counseling (35% of clergy), infidelity (32%), teen use of Internet (24% non-sexual, 18% sexual), compulsive Internet use (22%) and sexting (22%). The greatest percentage of Internet-related counseling was related to bullying, with 80% of respondents reporting pastoral counseling in that area. Almost one in four (22%) of clergy report that they have counseled a congregant arrested for online behavior.

### **Clergy Personal Use of New Media**

Clergy use social media in large numbers, with 96% having a personal Facebook page and 66% using Facebook once or more per day. Forty percent of clergy report that they have a Twitter account and 37% have a blog.

Large numbers of clergy as compared to the general public use social media to keep up with with other religious leaders and organizations. Six in ten (62%) follow a religious leader on social media (compared to 5% in the general population) and seven and ten joined a religious and/or spiritual group online (compared to 6%) of the general population.<sup>1</sup>

Half of the clergy respondents reported that they had never visited a sexually explicit web site, but one in five reported that they had done so in the past six months. An additional 16% responded that they prefer not to answer the question about use of these sites.

When asked what concerns if any they had about their personal Internet or social media use, 37% mentioned time on email, 19% reported worry over time spent on Facebook, and 17% worried about time spent surfing the web. Only 4% of respondents reported being concerned about time spent on sexually explicit websites.

When asked about Internet dating, 21% of clergy had used an online dating website. Of these, 49% indicate that they are clergy in their online profile, while 51% omit that information.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Public Religion Research Institute, PRRI Religion and Politics Tracking Survey, July 2012 (N=1,026)

## **Recommendations**

The Religious Institute recommends that congregations have formalized, written policies governing all online interactions. These should govern use of social media, web sites, and other Internet technologies. Specific policies need to address online interactions among adult and youth congregants, including friending policies and monitoring content. Clergy would benefit from education on their personal use of Internet technologies, as well as education on how best to counsel congregants with concerns about the Internet or social media.

## **Methodology**

The Religious Institute surveyed 932 clergy in its database who had working emails using an online survey. The response rate was 39% after three email messages requesting participation. The survey analysis was limited to the 74% of respondents that indicated they currently serve a congregation at least half time. This survey was conducted online between September 11 and October 7, 2012.

## **About the Religious Institute**

The Religious Institute ([www.religiousinstitute.org](http://www.religiousinstitute.org)), based in Westport, CT, is a nonprofit, multifaith organization dedicated to advocating for sexual health, education and justice in faith communities and society. More than 6,300 clergy, seminary presidents and deans, religious scholars and other religious leaders representing more than 70 faith traditions are part of the Religious Institute's national network.