

Looking for Love Online

Thousands of Christians are turning to the Internet to find romance. But is this a safe way to secure a mate?

Cinthia is an articulate environmental auditor from Brazil. She was 29 when she met Craig, a 27-year-old American aerospace engineer, through Christian Café, an online dating service. Craig was 27 and had dated a lot in search of the right person; Cinthia had an active social life but had dated less frequently.

“Craig and I met by a fluke really,” Cinthia recalls. “I matched all the categories he was looking for-except geographical. He was looking for a woman in his state of Colorado but forgot to type that in the day we hooked up. He told me that when he saw my profile and my response to the standardized questions, he said to himself, ‘If I could pick a wife, this is how I’d expect her to answer.’”

After two months of frequent e-mails, the couple exchanged phone numbers and talked every night. “The more we talked, the more I saw how much we had in common on the important issues of life, like faith, values and long-term goals. ... We weren’t head over heels but fell in love slowly.”

After two months of phone calls, Craig flew to Brazil where the pair spent four days getting to know each other. Seven visits and one year later, in September 2003, Craig and Cinthia married and now live near Denver. Cinthia says their marriage is “really great.”

This couple’s love story originates from one of the fastest-growing Internet industries-both inside and outside the United

States. Internet dating sites account for 1 percent of all U.S. Web sites-compared with 1.9 percent for travel and .73 percent for music-but garner the most content revenue, according to Jupiter Media Research, which keeps current dating-site statistics. In 2005, Jupiter researchers expected \$516 million to be spent in the U.S. on Internet dating, and to rise to \$642 million by 2008. In 2004, 21.8 million Americans browsed online dating sites.

A New Kind of Courtship

In the U.S., there are 870 sites devoted to dating. Although Christian Café is based in Toronto, it is ranked as No. 36 on the list because of the size of its membership and the number of hits it receives. Started for single Christians in 1999 by businessman Sam Moorcroft, the site has between 750,000 and 1 million members compared with 8.5 million members who subscribe to the No. 3-ranking eHarmony. Created by popular psychologist and author Neil Clark Warren in 2000, eHarmony is used mostly by Christians although it's not exclusively for believers.

"Most people are so busy these days that meeting potential dates online seems a lot more convenient than going to a dance or a dinner," says Bill Tancer, vice president of research for HitWise, a company that tracks 162 online industries and their users. "The fact that they spend 12 minutes max looking at a site says it all. The biggest competition for Christian dating sites is other dating sites because when people browse the Net, they're following links."

Jupiter analyst Nate Elliott says a recent poll showed that 44 percent of Americans are looking for a serious relationship when they use dating sites, 39 percent just want to date, and

another 20 percent want to marry.

Moorcroft was a 30-something single when he founded Christian Café. The day he spoke with Charisma, his wife, Polly, was going into labor and later gave birth to twins.

“I started this company because the options are extremely limited for Christian singles,” he says. “It’s kind of hard to ask a girl for a date during after-service coffee and cookies. It’s even harder for single-agains with kids to meet anyone.”

Today Christian Café has an annual revenue of \$2 million, Moorcroft says. The site allows members to make their own decisions about who to contact but doesn’t tolerate sexual talk, profanity or abuse, and promptly kicks off anyone who violates the rules. Potential members are invited to fill out a questionnaire about their beliefs, backgrounds and goals and are encouraged to post pictures.

eHarmony is interested in finding people the right “life-long mate,” says spokeswoman Marilyn Warren, who has been married to eHarmony founder Neil Clark Warren, Ph.D., for 46 years. “When Neil worked in psychotherapy, he spent a lot of his time presiding over the death of marriages, and he wants to see a different outcome,” she says.

Neil Warren worked eight years as dean of the psychology department at Fuller Theological Seminary in California and worked for 35 years as a clinical psychotherapist. Every potential eHarmony member is subjected to a barrage of 463 questions that Warren and a team of five psychologists crafted.

Marilyn Warren says the questions are designed to assess the

fundamentals of applicants' personalities so they can be matched with those they would mesh best with over the long haul. Members are not permitted to choose people at random but are matched scientifically, and are allowed to communicate with their matches in slow, steady stages while having their privacy protected.

She says at least 30,000 marriages have resulted from eHarmony matches. Between 60 percent and 65 percent of those who subscribe to eHarmony are born-again Christians, and members come from 220 different countries.

"We screen people's applications, and we turn away between 12 percent and 18 percent of them because they're too extreme," Marilyn Warren says. "Determining the emotional health of our members is very important, so we've never had a problem with ex-convicts or sexual predators."

Psychologist and author Kevin Leman, Ph.D., headlines MatchWise, a Christian site that started in April. It capitalizes on the idea that birth order is a major key to finding the right mate. Ranked No. 174 of all American sites, MatchWise celebrated its first engagement in the summer, just three months after it launched.

"People are busy working hard, and the singles events are so staged; that's why so many people go online," says Leman, who has been married for 38 years and has five children. "Some of my kids have used online dating, and my nephew met his fiancée through a site."

Applicants to the site are asked 70 questions based on the psychology contained in Leman's book *The Birth Order Book*.

Questions focus on people's childhood personalities, their strongest childhood memories, their views of the opposite sex, and a description of their parents and siblings. A team of psychometrists reviewed the questions before they were put on the site.

Applicants to MatchWise must be Christian, over 18, single and U.S. citizens. Approximately 10 percent of applicants are rejected because they don't meet these criteria or because they post sexually suggestive photos. The site states it doesn't allow non-Americans to join to guard against aiding those who simply want a visa to come to the U.S. or to marry an American in order to gain citizenship.

Camerin Courtney is editor of , an online singles column with a subscriber base of 25,000. Courtney, a 34-year-old single woman, met two men whom she dated several times through eHarmony. "Online dating is a viable option for many Christians," she says. "It's not right for everyone, though, which is why it must be done cautiously and prayerfully. I have one friend who tried it for a year and only had one date, while I have another friend who met her fiance through a site."

Courtney says the church is ignorant about the singles in their midst. "We're not doing community well enough," she says. "Singles rarely get invited to couples' houses or to family picnics. If singles aren't going to social activities and if we're not getting connected to the body, then we're creating the perfect storm for confusion over the single identity. Maybe Christians wouldn't use dating sites so much if we felt included in the church."

She says online dating can be a little less risky than dating

within one's own church circles. "If there's a messy break-up, then one of the people might end up leaving that church," she says. "With online dating, it's easier to avoid those painful scenarios."

Unhappy Endings

Statistics on the outcome of online matching are sketchy—partly because it's hard to track people's successes and failures unless they voluntarily report them and partly because the fiercely competitive industry doesn't want to publicize unhappy endings. And there are lots of them, according to groups that act as industry watchdogs.

Katherine (not her real name), a 57-year-old divorcee, is one of the casualties of online dating. After 10 years of being single, Katherine decided to try American Singles, a secular online dating service based in California. In February 2004, she was contacted by a man who appealed to her because he described himself as "a born-again Christian who wanted to be married" and posted pictures of himself with his grandchildren. They corresponded by e-mail for one month and then talked on the phone for three more months before they met.

"By the time we met, I totally trusted this man, and we were talking about marriage," Katherine says. "I flew to his city, he met me at the airport and then we drove to his place to stay. We agreed beforehand that we'd sleep in separate rooms and there'd be no fooling around."

But in the middle of the night, she says, the man came into her bedroom, put his hand over her mouth and raped her. "After

he did it, he said, 'I thank you so much for letting me make love to you before we get married.' I knew then how sick he was."

Katherine says she was held hostage 12 more days. "He told me he had a gun and said I better not think about leaving because he knew how to find me," she says.

She finally convinced him to let her return home-after she pretended to accept his proposal of marriage-so she could get her affairs in order. He continued to call her two or three times a day for two weeks and she played along with him.

"I knew I had to come up with the right plan to get him out of my life permanently," she says. "I told him I had serious vaginal bleeding and had to go to a special treatment clinic in Colorado. He bought the story. The next day I changed my phone numbers and had a friend of mine in Colorado mail him a letter I'd written."

The man continued to harass Katherine by phoning her son and her workplace, telling them he was coming to town and would find her. Katherine says she didn't press charges because her grandchildren don't know what happened and she never wants them to know.

Most dating sites post safety tips, such as don't reveal your home address or phone number, meet in a public place-which Katherine didn't do-and listen to your gut instinct about a person's character. But only a handful conduct background checks on prospective clients. , a dating site in Texas, conducts criminal checks through Rapsheets Criminal Records and also verifies the marital status of users.

Taylor Cole, senior director of public relations for , says the company does checks because clients express concern about the safety of online dating.

“When we started off in January 2004, we weeded out 11 percent of our applicants just by doing criminal checks and verifying their marital status. Statistics show that 67.5 percent of convicted criminals who are released from prison re-offend. We did a poll and found that one in three users of dating sites believe the sites are doing background criminal checks.”

“During 15 months, in Texas, more than 500 people were denied membership because 134 were convicted felons,” adds Herb Vest, president of . “The crimes ranged from homicide to sexual assault, injuries to children, aggravated assaults, organized crime, stalking and terrorist threats. In Florida, 497 people were rejected over a four-month period for material misrepresentations, felony and sexual offenses.”

, which is a secular site, backs the efforts of the Safer Online Dating Alliance (SODA), a coalition of 137 organizations that are advocating a 50-state initiative that will require dating sites to state clearly whether they conduct criminal checks on potential members. So far, six states have introduced bills to their legislatures, but none have been passed, Cole says.

Jayne Hitchcock, president of Working to Halt Online Abuse (WHOA), is a former victim of online harassment. In 1998 she succeeded in getting a bill through the Maryland legislature that allowed Internet harassers to be prosecuted with a \$500 fine and up to three years in prison. Today 45 states have cyber-stalking or harassment laws on the books.

“If the problem is addressed soon enough, the person doing the harassing often stops,” she says. “Sometimes, though, people wait until it’s escalated so far that the stalker has brought the harassment off-line. Then the police have to be called.”

Marilyn Warren believes the best antidote to bizarre online behavior is to screen members before allowing them to contact others. “Often someone who’s sick will want instant gratification and not want to go through the hoops,” she says. “People who are emotionally healthy can work the online system to their advantage until they meet a good match. One of our happiest endings was an 81-year-old widowed professor who found an 81-year-old lady online and eventually married her.”

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