

Looking For a Love Connection

Christian singles are looking for love today by visiting Internet chat rooms and by using Christian dating services. Are these the best ways to find a mate who loves Jesus?

Saturday night hits, and it's time to get ready for your hot date with that special someone. There's no need to dress up; your favorite jeans will do. Just put on the coffee, throw a blanket over your shoulders and meander into the living room to snuggle up close-to your computer.

Welcome to dating in the new millennium, Internet style. It's a blend of the old and the new. Matchmakers and love letters are back, but today we use professional dating services and our letters are sealed with a modem instead of a kiss.

So why are Christian singles stepping outside of traditional venues to find soul mates? And how can those who use dating services look for love without finding trouble?

Dating services have been around for years, but most agencies are now expanding to the Internet, upgrading both their accessibility and their image. And despite the seemingly impersonal touch, Christian singles are increasingly turning to the online world to find the man or woman of their dreams. Many find dating online to be convenient and fun, providing a stigma-free way to break out of loneliness and opening up a whole new world of potential mates.

Although the Bible instructs believers not to be unequally yoked, singles cross a broad span of age and lifestyles, making it difficult to find a compatible mate. Linda Mintle, a clinical psychologist in Wheaton, Illinois, says it is also

hard to find someone who isn't "entangled in broken relationships."

Along with the rise in unwed mothers, 1 out of 4 Americans has experienced divorce. This includes born-again Christians, who are actually more likely to split up than unbelievers, according to a recent study by the Barna Research Group.

In addition, statistics show that there are more women available than men. The pool is even smaller for women of color and those who are highly educated, says Mintle, author of *Getting Unstuck* (Creation House). "Women don't like to marry down in their economic class," she adds.

Many Christian singles are highly involved in their careers and churches, but often prospects there are limiting, or they are simply uncomfortable with dating in those settings. While some turn to hobbies and clubs with a quiet hope of meeting someone, others take a more direct approach.

Giselle Aguiar, a graphic artist in Melbourne, Florida, was frustrated with the prospects of meeting a soul mate in her church. She even tried a computerized dating service, but the matching system ignored her faith.

So in 1995, after spending some time in a Christian singles chat room, she began to think about the possibility of using the Internet to bring singles together. Before long she had developed her own company, Christian Singles Online (CSO), advertising it as the first Christian dating service on the Internet.

Her clients fill out detailed applications, including

questions about their religious preferences in a mate. They can wait for matches from Aguiar, or they can browse online themselves through profiles at a members-only site.

Aguiar, who calls herself the “head cupid” of CS0, recently announced the agency’s 15th wedding. Each couple’s love story can be found on the CS0 Web site,

“I love it!” Aguiar told Charisma. “I feel the Lord somehow gets people to my Web site, or moves them to call me, and I just help them along.”

Some people object to services like these, saying they reduce an important decision such as marriage to simply shopping for a mate. But Aguiar—herself still single—says it’s a time-saver. And she believes that ultimately it is God who brings people together.

Flirting With Danger

Although many singles do find love online, some say they are flirting with danger because it’s so easy for people to feign credibility on the Internet. Even Aguiar cautions people to meet in a public place until solid trust is established. That’s why many dating services personally run background checks on their members, although CS0 does not.

“I can’t with the price I offer,” says Aguiar, who charges a nominal \$35 membership-until-marriage fee. Dating agencies can cost anywhere from \$20 to \$5,000 depending on the services they offer.

Instead, Aguiar refers her members to Investigate Your Date, a public records information service based in Maplewood, New Jersey. Owner Matthew Carmel says anonymity on the Internet has precipitated the need for services like his. All you need is a name, address and birthdate, or a social security number, and for \$49-\$149, he can search for information and a criminal record.

In this new branch of his business, Carmel has already encountered age discrepancies, false addresses and even a possible mob connection, but "plenty of times we do a search and nothing out of the ordinary is found," he says.

But can a background check backfire and provide a stranger with too much information about you?

"If we have any suspicion that the person wants the information other than for safety reasons, we refuse to do the project," Carmel says.

Although he cannot judge the motives of his clients, the information Carmel provides is all public record anyway. He does not, however, release credit information. "We comply with the Fair Credit Reporting Act," he says.

Even with personal screening and a background check, there are never guarantees when it comes to dating. "We assume [CSO's clients] are Christians and they're telling the truth, but you have to be cautious," Aguiar says. "But it can be the same with the guy you meet at a singles' meeting."

She has a point there. Serious dangers such as date rape and stalking were around long before the Internet. So how is

meeting a stranger online different from meeting him at a local bookstore?

“The difference is you’re not face to face and can’t use your intuitive sense,” Mintle says. Other experts agree. Without human elements like eye contact and body language, cyber-relationships bring new meaning to the term “blind date.”

Renown counselor Stephen Arterburn, founder of New Life Clinics in Laguna Beach, California,

says it’s easy for people on the Internet to create false identities. And because they are anonymous or remote, you cannot verify their integrity with their friends, family and co-workers.

“It’s sort of like role-playing, like a kid playing house,” adds Leslie Parrott, therapist, author and co-founder of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Washington. “You take on a different personality because you want to see what it’s like to have that one.”

Singles should also guard against unwittingly falling into a cyber-affair. It’s easy for married people to pose as singles on the Internet. Even if you have their real name, it can be a chore to verify their marital status because marriage certificates are only registered by state.

The danger is not always just a matter of deception, Parrott says. People may unknowingly convey only a part of themselves or project desired traits into the other person, she explains.

"It costs so little risk to sit in a room and have a relationship on a computer," Parrott says. "It's not a real risk because it's not every dimension of yourself that you're interacting with."

Anonymous relationships are high-risk in another way, however. Chat rooms, for example, are a dangerous playing field for people who are tempted to try out their sexual fantasies without getting caught. In his new book, *Avoiding* (Thomas Nelson), Arterburn and co-author Meg J. Rinck detail 10 male personality types that can cause destructive relationships, from "the deceiver" to "the addict."

Arterburn's advice is that people should conduct themselves as if they were in a physical room with four walls. If the discussion becomes intrusive or erotic, "Get up and walk out," he says. "Your soul is going into that room."

If a cyber-relationship becomes inappropriate, it seems that it would be easy to simply turn off the computer and walk away. But like television, the Internet has an addictive power that can affect people's lives profoundly.

According to the Center for On-Line Addiction (COA) in Bradford, Pennsylvania, people who neglect home and work responsibilities as well as their "real life" relationships in exchange for their cyber-friends may be heading for an Internet addiction. In her book, *Caught in the Net*, COA founder and author Kimberly Young details the warning signs and consequences of Internet addictions, with a special focus on the "faceless community" of cyber-relationships.

One of the greatest draws of dating services is that their referrals can save singles a lot of time in their search for a compatible mate. But if people maintain an online relationship for a long time before meeting face to face, sometimes they end up regretting the time and emotional investment they have lost.

In the 1998 film, *You've Got Mail*, Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan become soul mates through months of anonymous e-mail correspondence. But when they finally decide to meet, they discover that they already know each other as business enemies in the "real world."

Although Hollywood can create happy endings, reality is not always so kind. *Arterburn* tells of a man who waited at an airport for the woman of his dreams, only to discover she had taken him for a ride. They had met online, and instead of flying in from another country to marry him, she routed to a different city to marry another man.

Happily Ever After

Despite the dangers of cyber-romance, dating service providers remind us that there are many couples who do end up happily married after using a dating service, although it's too early for solid statistics on the success or failure of Internet relationships.

Not all Christian dating services rely solely on the Internet for connections, however. *Equally Yoked*, a national Christian singles' club, has a personal presence in 27 offices around the United States, as well as on the Internet. Boasting more

than 20,000 members, their goal is to network members together through

activities, workshops and an extensive database.

“Our whole mission is to create possibilities for our members,” says vice president Tom Christopher. Founded in California in 1986, Equally Yoked is not a matching service, but rather an events-based group that works with churches.

Members, who are all personally screened, can search through one another’s profiles either in local offices or online. Then they contact one another by mutual consent via office personnel.

Members can also meet one another at events sponsored by Equally Yoked, which range from Bible studies to comedy shows. And in locations where there is no office nearby, “City Groups” are forming where leaders organize activities and interview new members.

“It’s not the desperate and dateless,” says Christopher, who claims that Equally Yoked attracts the most, and the best, singles in town.

Anything that provides a healthy arena for Christian singles to pursue their interests and develop themselves is exactly what singles need, counselors say. “The more interesting you are, the more you have to offer someone in a relationship,” Mintle says.

Most counselors also recommend that singles spend some time working on emotional and spiritual wholeness—especially those

who have come out of failed relationships in the past.

“If you try to build intimacy with another person before you’ve done the hard work of getting whole on your own,” says Parrott, “then all your relationships will become an attempt to complete yourself.”

Most people have a mental list of what they want in a mate. But as helpful as dating services can be at matching compatibility, if your list is too narrow you might look past the right person.

Beverly Bartkowiak was 35 years old when she visited a church in Virginia. Opening the church bulletin, she stumbled across an ad for a Christian dating service, and although she had never considered joining one before, the idea intrigued her.

Before signing up for anything, Beverly, an African American, called the company to find out if their clientele included African American men. When they said yes, she filled out the detailed application, but stated no racial preference. “It’s almost like applying for a job with the Secret Service,” Beverly jokes.

After about six introductions, some of which didn’t interest her beyond a telephone call, the agency asked Beverly if she would be willing to date a Caucasian man who had selected her profile. She agreed.

It wasn’t love at first sight, she says, but on their first date, they talked for hours at a restaurant. “He had been married before,” she says, “and to a black woman. I was really curious about that.”

Less than a year later, John and Beverly were married, and now they are the happy parents of an adopted daughter, Bethany. The Bartkowiaks live just outside Washington, D.C.

Looking back, Beverly says she was pleased with the dating service. "It wasn't the type where you had to do videos or pictures so someone could make a judgment call on you based on your looks," she says.

But not all the men she met through the agency seemed to be genuine Christians—a common complaint about dating services. She thinks even non-Christians are attracted to Christian agencies because they are looking for a certain type of person. "It's like going to church to find a wife, looking for some quality people," she says.

In spite of the pitfalls, many professionals believe dating services and the Internet can be viable places to meet a mate as long as people choose reputable agencies and use safeguards.

With the high rate of divorce among Christians, counselors urge couples not to rush into marriage, even if they feel God is telling them to marry. "Please wait a year and see if God is still telling you that," Arterburn advises.

Research shows that couples who go through seven to 14 sessions of premarital counseling, and those who walk through at least two years of life experiences together before taking their vows have a more successful marriage.

"You know you're there if you've gone from wanting to hear the

person breathe, to where their breathing irritates you," Arterburn quips.

And that's a dynamic you won't experience on the Internet.

Anahid Schweikert is a frequent contributor to Charisma and lives in Iron Mountain, Michigan. She met her husband when a friend introduced them at a church barbeque.

To to Wait? It's a hot debate

Two popular books have today's singles buzzing about what God thinks about romance.

The whole concept of dating has undergone a revolution in some segments of Christian culture in recent years. Because of the world's unchaste influences, a growing number of Christian singles are replacing dating with old-fashioned courtship.

Joshua Harris was surprised with the sweeping support of his 1998 best-seller, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Multnomah). Originally targeting high schoolers and young adults, the book is being embraced by singles of all ages.

Harris, director of New Attitude, a ministry for young adults in Gaithersburg, Maryland, says he omitted the word "courtship" from his book because it is often seen as a programmatic alternative to dating rather than an intrinsic attitude change. But as in courtship, Harris challenges singles to refrain from romantic relationships until they are truly ready for marriage.

Biblical purity is more than just drawing a line regarding physical intimacy, he says. It's a matter of guarding your mind, motives and emotions.

In his book, Harris describes the "season of singleness" as a God-given time for character development and unbridled service to the Lord. "Although we don't sin when we look forward to marriage, we might be guilty of poor stewardship of our singleness," he writes.

Worldly dating is often romance-based rather than friendship-based, Harris believes, and it encourages intimacy without commitment.

"Friendship is about something other than the two people in the relationship," he writes. "Intimacy is only about each other."

But not everyone agrees with the idea of courtship, or "smart love," as Harris calls it. Some claim the philosophy drives some singles toward extremes of either premature marriage or avoidance of the opposite sex.

"I have never advocated that people rashly jump into marriage or rashly commit to someone and then get to know them later," Harris told Charisma, admitting he is sometimes misunderstood. "But deepening intimacy should match deepening commitment."

As for singles who completely avoid the opposite sex, Harris believes "they are neglecting their responsibility as a brother or sister in Christ."

So should Christian singles throw dating out the window? Jeramy Clark, associate pastor of student ministries at Tri-Lakes Chapel in Monument, Colorado, wrote *I Gave Dating a Chance* (Waterbrook Press). He challenges singles to reform, rather than abandon, dating habits.

Dating means different things to different people, he says, but Christians should feel free to date as long as it is done with purity and clear intentions. Clark encourages singles to keep dates lighthearted, warning that there is a danger in being too marriage-minded.

"If we clean up our act as Christians and date responsibly, then we can honor God in those relationships," he says.

Clark is concerned about some Christian campuses where students who date are looked down on by those who don't. He also believes the close involvement of parents sometimes infringes on the couple's opportunity to build their own relationship.

"Some families get so involved that the young couples are not even out of the parents' sight when they spend time together," he says.

Clark, who is married, believes singles should think of a date as a "relationship interview," and determine their own boundaries based on God's Word rather than playing by cultural rules of courtship. But to this he adds a firm warning: "Pride will tell you that you can handle anything."

Despite their differences, Harris and Clark both reject flirting, immodesty and "playing the field," as well as

unequally yoked relationships. They both agree that Christian singles should treat one another as brothers and sisters, with a goal of honoring God. And they both emphasize honesty, accountability and avoidance of sexual temptations, agreeing that rules alone don't prevent sin.