

Most Americans keep their faith private while online

by [Chris Lisee](#) in the [September 5, 2012](#) issue

Meet the social media “nones.” A new survey finds that though most Americans are religious, they generally do not use social media to supplement worship and mostly keep their faith private online.

The Public Religion Research Institute survey found about one in 20 Americans followed a religious leader on Twitter or Facebook. A similar number belonged to a religious or spiritual Facebook group.

The results seem to defy the familiar story of prominent religious leaders using social media to build a following—and a brand. “We were surprised when this turned up really low levels of people engaging religion and faith online,” said PRRI research director Daniel Cox.

Cox said churches face many challenges in connecting with people via social media. Megachurches may reach a large audience that way, but the majority of Americans attend smaller houses of worship that lack the resources to run social media campaigns, Cox said. In addition, the millennial generation, which most strongly embraces social media, doesn’t attend services as often as older generations.

According to a recent Pew survey, one-third of adults who use the Internet do not use social networking sites. A significant minority of Americans do not access the Internet. The Pew survey also found that half of Facebook users didn’t list their religious affiliation on their profile.

Alan Rudnick, pastor of First Baptist Church of Ballston Spa in upstate New York, considers Facebook and Twitter essential for reaching out to his congregation and local community. But Americans, he said, may be reluctant to label themselves for personal spiritual reasons or out of fear of being ostracized.

“Because social media on Facebook and other places is so easily accessed, people are distancing themselves, because organized religion in a lot of circles has a

negative connotation,” he said.

The PRRI survey of more than 1,000 respondents also found white evangelicals were much more likely to use social media for religious purposes, though only a minority did so. One in four white evangelicals say they have listened to a sermon online or downloaded a podcast, compared to 6 percent each for Catholics and other Protestants.

The survey also found that 10 percent of respondents have taken video or photos with their cell phone during worship, and nearly as many admitted to sending or reading e-mail during services. —RNS