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## Online prayer posts offer a glimpse into a world of hurt, need

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I visited [www.prayabout.com](http://www.prayabout.com) this week, a new Web site where people of any faith can post prayers and invite others to pray for them. More than 10,000 people have reportedly used it since it started in May.

Reading them feels like hacking into God's in-box. You get a glimpse at the world-convulsing passion of human need. Huge numbers are afflicted with tumors or depression, needing relief. Other traumas or hopes are named. A Hindu woman in India, age 45, asks God for children. A nondenominational Canadian asks divine intervention to improve a tough housing market.

More typical is a Florida woman's worried plea about her fiance's drug habit:

"Pray for him to say no to Satan and all the bad things around him. I ask God to let him know I will help him get the help he needs. I will not judge him. I will not turn my back on him." Her cry inspired more than 60 responses.

### **Petitions get exposure**

Online prayers dramatize the way technology is redefining, or rerouting, spiritual solidarity.

With a simple click, cyberspace elevates a Nashville prayer to worldwide exposure and empathy. (Most of the prayers are Christian, and 35 posts from are Tennessee as of this writing.)

But it also raises the oldest questions about how prayer works.

It feels voyeuristic to read such personal yearnings unless you intend to join the chain and add force to these pleas to heaven. It also forces you to reassess your own view of prayer.

A cyber-community of petition prayer implies the value of strength in numbers — reassurance for the lonely petitioner by a large lobbying effort at eternity's doorstep.

Is that how prayer works — a matter of getting God's attention?

### **Some prayers missing**

What about the people without Internet? I've noticed no prayers here about orphans, miners underground, prisoners who receive no visitors, the veteran returning from Iraq with half his face missing. Where are the prayers for public life, shouldering against puritanical hypocrisy? What about prayers for courage to live up to one's religion? When 30,000 children die each day of malnutrition and poverty, what should we pray about?

Since 9/11, humanity's prayers have grown more intense, more contradictory: Christians vs. Muslims vs. Jews. Sept. 11 tore the lid off the world's religious malpractice, the many

ways people use God's name vainly to justify their own hatreds and failures. Everybody's locked in mutual misunderstanding, cocooned in their own ingrown godliness.

Prayabout.com is loaded with diary-like entries unconnected to geopolitical fire storms. But occasionally you find breakthroughs across faith — a Baptist praying on behalf of a Muslim's personal suffering, a Hindu praying for a Methodist's strained marriage, without snarky put-down. At such moments, pain and sym pathy trump denominational pride, like an answered prayer.

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