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FAITH

Plugged into God

Online faith message can't replace gathering of souls

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

Faith groups across York Region are taking advantage of the Internet to get their message out, with many churches, synagogues and mosques creating websites offering sermons, daily prayer suggestions and religious links.

But online worship — participation in religious service webcasts — is not likely to replace faith services in Canada, despite its growing popularity in the United States, religious representatives said.

In fact, they argued, the fellowship of worship is almost as important as worship itself.

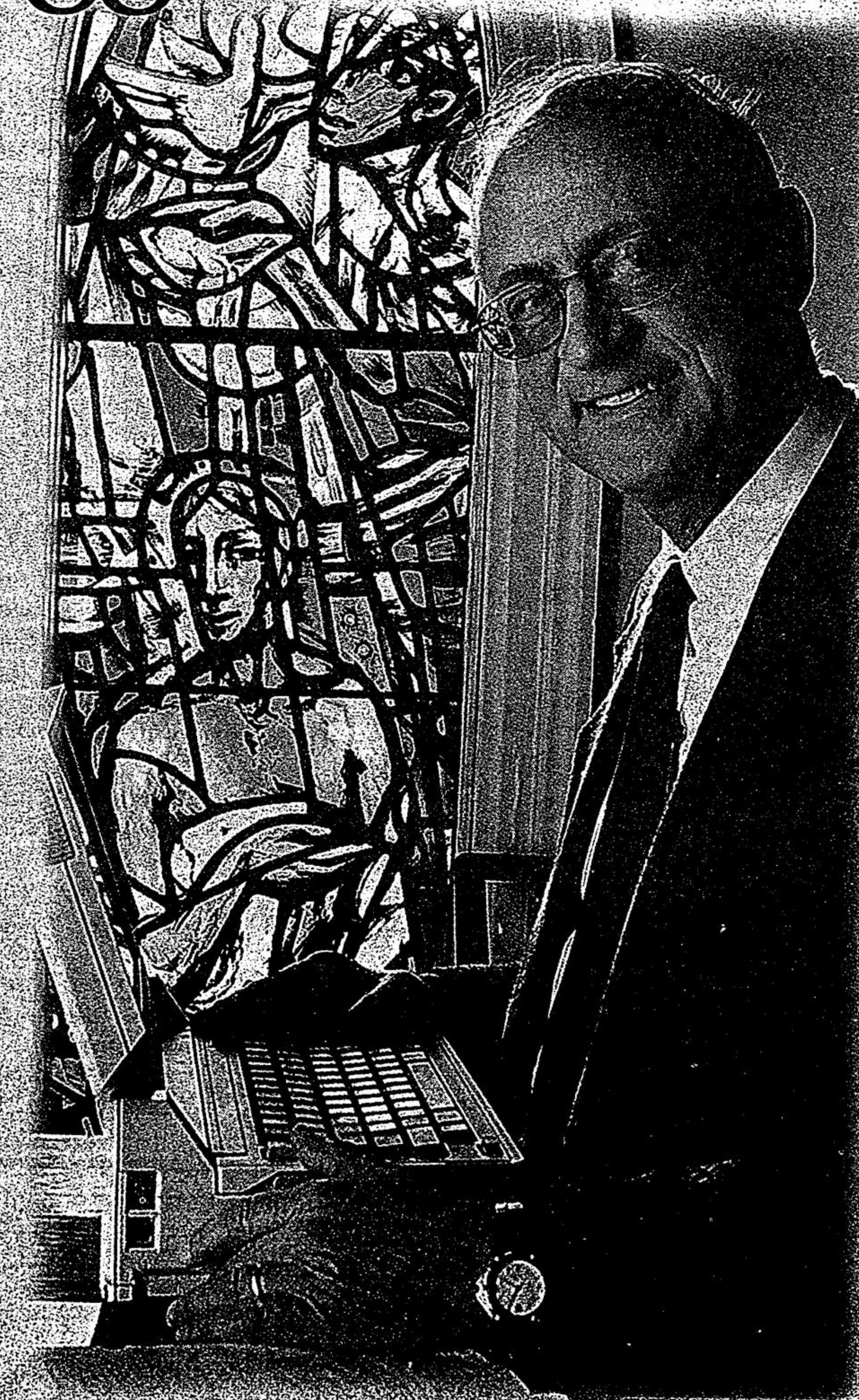
"I don't see it coming ever," said Shabbir Mohamed of the Jaffari Islamic Centre in Thornhill. "We pray five times a day, it's a physical thing. And even in those daily prayers, people are encouraged to get together."

According to a recent U.S. Pew Internet Project study, 28 million Americans have logged on to find out more about their faith or research other religions.

It's easy to see the attraction. The web provides around-the-clock and around-the-globe opportunities to share prayers and concerns, a convenient and anonymous way to learn about other faiths, and a massive resource for prayers, hymns and all things religious to aid people with daily prayers and devotions.

Chats and forums take place every day on Microsoft Networks online religion and beliefs groups, with people joining a plethora of discussion groups, including Christian Stay at Home Moms (1,187 members), Muslims Around the World (1,421 members) and The Rabbi's Study (115 members).

At faithandvalues.com, which boasts 70 Christian and Jewish faith groups as members, religious information, news updates and discussions on faith-related



Rev. Ralph Garbe of Unionville United Church said his church's website allows people to find out about the ministry without actually attending services.

issues are offered.

Religious education and theology courses in many denominations can also be found online, as can faith history, teenage activities and links to crisis counselling

But online worship hasn't exploded in Canada the way it has down south.

"I have heard very little about it here," said freelance religious writer Ron Csillag said. "It seems

to be mainly an American phenomenon. They are a very religious society, and to marry both the spiritual and technical aspects

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Ron Csillag

President Bush can't enlist God in U.S. army

To judge by his rhetoric — fractured syntax, misplaced modifiers, sub-par grammar and all — United States President George W. Bush believes God has chosen him to lead the U.S. in this war against "evil."

The God talk in Bush's White House surpasses even that of one-time Sunday school teacher Jimmy Carter, who recognized God forgave him certain sins, committing adultery in his heart, for one. But Mr. Carter never gave the impression God was on "our" side.

Former Bush speechwriter David Frum, the putative author of the president's now-famous "axis of evil" remark, summed up the tone in the current White House when he recounted the first words he heard on the job: "Missed you at Bible study."

President Bush's view of the world could be even more black and white than cold warrior Ronald Reagan's.

"The terrorists hate the fact that we can worship God Almighty as we see fit," President Bush told a group of religious broadcasters in late February.

Odd that philosophy doesn't apply to the terrorists, who also worship God as they see fit.

Then he laid out his vision the U.S. is called to bring God's gift of liberty "to every human being in the world."

While few doubt President Bush is sincere in his faith, the problem is with his evident conviction he's doing God's bidding. God is firmly in his corner because, as a recent article in the Atlantic noted, the Almighty has played a salvific role in his life.

"You know I had a drinking problem," he told a group of clergy who met with him last September. "Right now, I

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