

Instapray app puts our best (and worst) prayer impulses on display

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(RNS) As long as people have been praying, they have also been asking for prayer from one another. In the Bible, the New Testament is full of requests from Paul and others to pray for them; contemporary places of worship often offer time in their services to pray for the specific needs of their parishioners.

A new app called Instapray makes sense as a digital heir to that tradition.

Founded by Stanford grad Fryderyk Ovcaric and backed by venture capitalist Peter Thiel, among others, Instapray is billed as “a safe place that connects people around the world through prayers.”

The company’s website encourages users to “Request prayers, share your prayers, pray for someone, and get connected! Become a part of the Instapray community and share your love, support, happiness, or struggles with the world around you.”

The app lets you change the text of your prayer, mark it as answered, leave a comment or add a hashtag. Once you have written the prayer, you can easily share it on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or via email; it automatically gets sent out to the live feed that all Instapray users see when they log in.

The prayers are often little more than what another app might call a status update: Users post pictures of their pets who are sick, share Bible verses, recommend churches. One member from Arkansas posted a picture of his drivers permit test and said that, on his sixth try, he “asked God to give me the victory and He gave it to me even though I hadn’t looked at the material for weeks until today and stayed up until 3 AM last night.” An older woman was having trouble with a friend; another woman asked for prayer for her family after the death of her brother. One man prayed for favor in his relationship with his boss so that he could get the schedule he wanted.

Instapray isn't affiliated with a particular religion, although from the number of Bible verses referenced, it's clear that it is popular among Christians. Ovcarić presented the app at the Values Voter Summit last year, where he mentioned that it was inspired by the "Insta-Prayer" program Jim Carrey's character created in the movie "Bruce Almighty." It makes sense — when you open the app, you'll be reminded of the scene from that movie where Carrey hears a jumble of prayers for the first time.

Instapray is more than a little bit overwhelming — it's cluttered and hard to figure out where your attention should go in a sea of prayer requests. And prayer can, apparently, bring out some of the worst in people; you will see posts contrasting Caitlyn Jenner ("Accepted for being transgendered") and Tim Tebow ("Hated for being Christian?"), and political statements disguised as prayer. That's nothing new, but Instapray can spread those messages on a whole different level. At its worst, Instapray can be like the worst possible version of Pinterest.

But at its best, there is something good about being reminded that when we pray, we're connected to a much larger group of people all over the world.

An app can't take the place of the church, and it can't take the place of praying with someone in person. It feels a little goofy to claim that God gave you victory on your drivers' test the sixth time through just because you prayed the right prayer. The logo is cheesy and Instapray will be impossible to monetize.

The impulse, though, is a lovely one — to connect people in need of something beyond what they can create for themselves. Our best and worst impulses are on display when we pray — and now they're available to us all, with the press of a button.