Isn't Open Source Socialistic?

By Russ McGuire - russ.mcguire@gmail.com

We're continuing the series on "Launching Online" – capturing the decisions faced and lessons learned in launching a new online ministry/business. Last month we talked about the decisions we faced in choosing our development platform – what operating system, database, and primary programming language we would use in launching our service.

As you'll recall, we settled on the LAMP stack – Linux, Apache, MySQL, and PHP, all of which are open sourced, and in large part because there is so much other open source software available that runs on LAMP. So, this month, we'll dig more deeply into open source and specific decisions we made relative to the launch of our ministry/business.

Socialism vs. Capitalism?

When I first started writing publicly about technology issues from a Christian perspective, I received a note from a reader attacking open source, and specifically Linux, from a proclaimed Christian perspective. This reader equated the open source movement to socialism and claimed that Microsoft products were essential to the spread of the gospel. This obviously challenged me to more deeply consider these claims.

Let's start by understanding what "open source" is really all about. There are lots of projects that are considered open source and they follow a number of different models, but what makes something "open source" is that the "source" is "open." In other words, the actual programming code is available to anyone who wants it. Almost always the source code is published on the Internet and can be downloaded without having to sign a non-disclosure agreement or pay a fee.

However, open source is generally released under a software license which defines how it can be used and modified. The most common license for open source projects is the GNU Public License (GPL), but there are many other licenses that have important differences. (For example, when I launched Living Stones Ministry, I worked with my lawyer to develop an open source license that prohibits use of the software in a way that is counter to the glory of God.) Open source licenses allow folks to freely download and use the software and encourage further innovation by modifying the licensed software.

Some open source projects are one man efforts, but the best known ones are huge efforts involving hundreds of developers spread around the world. These developers generally come from many

DISCOVER the *Next* Generation of Church Ministry Management Software TODAY!

You Owe it to Yourself to Explore the Possibilities

Scalable for Every Sized Church!

"Price and robust features makes ConnectionPower the sweet spot for the very large church..." *– Weekend Attendance 7,000*

"They have the perfect price point, church growth tools and management solutions for a new church plant."
– Denominational Executive

"ConnectionPower has taken our church to the next level with a 37% visitor retention rate producing rapid growth from 400 just 3 years ago."
– Weekend Attendance 2,500

connectionpower.com

www.connectionpower.com • 866.701.3373

Request a FREE Demo NOW!

SECURE CHECK-IN

INTEGRATED WEB CALENDAR

TRANSFORM YOUR WEBSITE

The Fastest GROWING and *Leading* Web-Based Church Management Provider!

different companies, volunteering either their company's time or their own personal time to advance the goals of the project. Although the developers don't all work for the same company, that doesn't mean that open source projects are characterized by anarchy. Large open source projects have well defined hierarchy, with project leaders, sub-projects, and project schedules (all using open source tools to stay coordinated, of course). In fact, given the diversity of developers in employer, geography, time zone, native language, and culture, large open source projects are even more dependent on good project management than proprietary corporate efforts.

All of this contrasts pretty dramatically with how commercial software projects are developed, where a single company generally develops and controls the product, charges for its use, and does not allow anyone to access the source code, except under special circumstances with very strict controls.

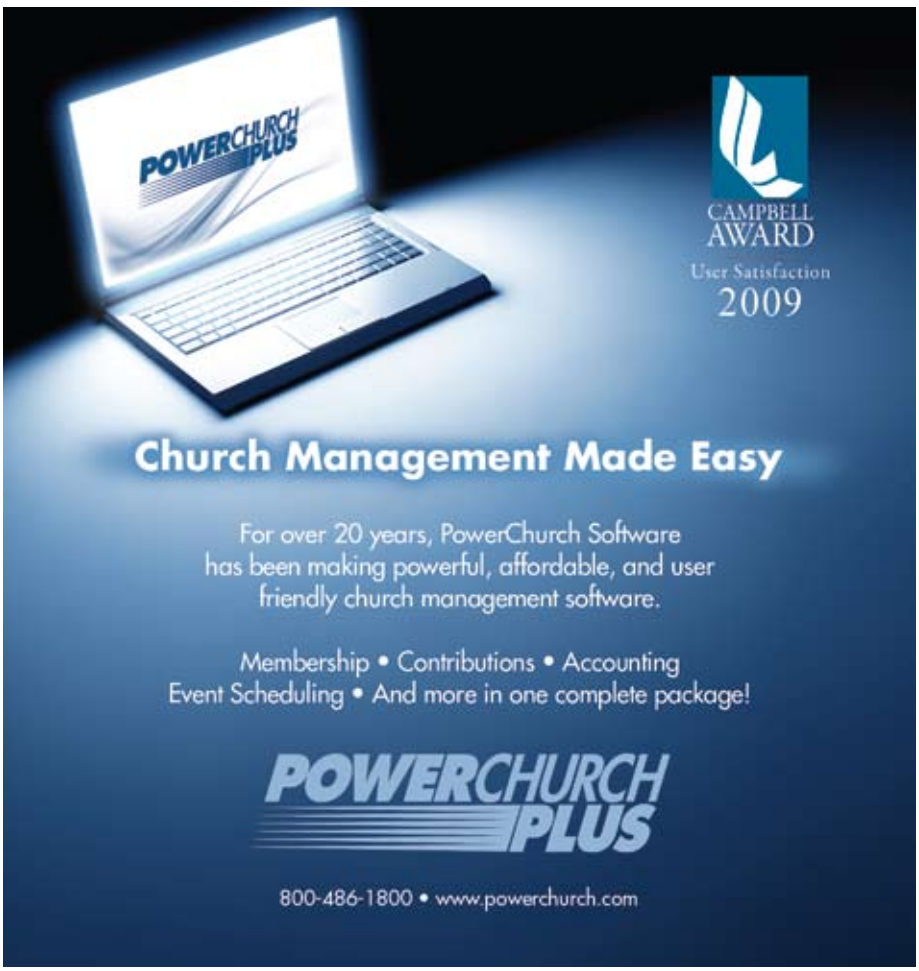
Does Open Source Honor God?

But the key question is whether or not open source is "socialistic" or even more importantly whether or not it is honoring to God.

Dictionary.com defines socialism as "a theory or system of social organization that advocates the vesting of the ownership and control of the means of production and distribution, of capital, land, etc., in the community as a whole." Usually "the community as a whole" means the government, so socialism makes everyone dependent on the state as the owner and controller of all assets and resources.

In contrast, Dictionary.com defines capitalism as "an economic system in which investment in and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange of wealth is made and maintained chiefly by private individuals or corporations, esp. as contrasted to cooperatively or state-owned means of wealth."

In open source development, investment is made by private individuals (and sometimes corporations) into an asset that is then available to the community as a whole. Most contributors to open source invest their time and resources because they believe they will benefit directly from it – either monetarily by building businesses around the project (e.g. providing consulting or support) or by generating good will for their main business or by gaining valuable experience that will help them in their long term



career. Their contributions are not coerced by the state, but are a free-will offering to benefit the community, and by extension, themselves.

At its most communal, the open source movement reminds me of the early church as described in Acts 4:32 "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common." (ESV) But most of the time, it's just another way to operate a business – through more collaborative forms of innovation.

Do I believe that the open source approach to software development is honoring to God? I think it certainly can be – as much as any other approach. And as much as any other approach, it can be dishonoring to God. It's not the approach to development and licensing that is the determinant.

Thousands Of Churches Use Group Text Mesaging

Send inspirational messages, reminders, donation requests, youth ministry trip reminders and more!

Members text your keyword to 313131 to join your group's text messaging list.
Try It Now: Text MyChurch to 313131

Read about us at Mobile Ministry Magazine & Church Drop
Hear about us on the Geeks & God podcast

Try It Free - Signup In 60 seconds
Plans Start At $10/Month

www.EzTexting.com
212 255 4663
info@EzTexting.com

Why Open Source?

As I mentioned last month, we chose PHP as the programming language because of our comfort working with it and the availability of open source. Our service is a social network for Christian families, especially those that home school. There's a growing set of solutions available for launching a social network, including Ning, WackWall, SocialGo, KickApps, Dolphin, Kootali, etc.

Most of these solutions make it easy to create a social network in minutes that works just like all the other social networks that use the same solution. But the need that we are trying to minister to requires different functionality. It requires the definition of a family structure and the recognition of the authority of parents. That means that we're going to need to write new software that is unique to our service.

An open source solution gives us the benefit of a fully featured starting point. It takes hours to deploy, rather than minutes, but once the basic functionality is up and running, we have complete access to the source code to make modifications. That means that we can create the unique capabilities that are required to set our service apart from all the secular services that are already out there.

Another benefit of open source software is that there's a community of developers that are constantly adding new capabilities. However, if we're making changes to the software, then integrating newly developed capabilities from others back into the software that we've changed may become a challenge. And considering that challenge, when selecting a specific open source solution, will be the focus of next month's column. Until then, keep "launching online" to the glory of God!

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (http://hschooler.net), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by three homeschooled students under Russ' direction.

-