WordPress

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The new year often brings renewed commitments, such as "This year, I'm finally going to update our website." If it's been a few years since you refreshed your site, you might just now be realizing how many church websites are built using WordPress. Is it the answer for you? What do you need to be concerned about?

What is WordPress?

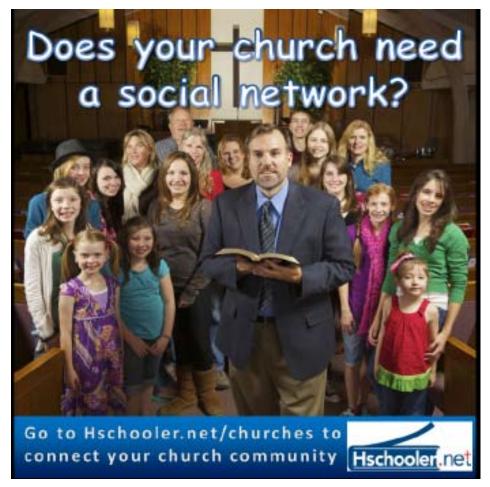WordPress is open source software that makes it easy to publish content on the web.

I've used WordPress for close to a decade for various blogs that I write. The first blog I ever set up was in 2000 when blogging tools were limited in options and capabilities (that first blog was, and still is, on BlogSpot). A few years later, when I went to create a new blog, I was delighted to find WordPress. The software was easy to use to create and manage new posts and categories, and already there were a number of themes available to make it all look attractive.

Since WordPress is open source, smart folks recognized that the software could do so much more than just support blogs, so over time more and more capabilities have been added to make it a full-fledged content management system. Today, the WordPress.org website simply says "WordPress is web software you can use to create a beautiful website or blog." The original developer of WordPress claims that 16% of websites use the software.

One of the reasons why WordPress has been so successful is it's extensibility. Like other open source software, the source code is available, so other developers can improve it. (And like other open source projects, the software is free to use.) But, more importantly, from the beginning WordPress has been designed to make

it easy to extend without touching the core software. What I noticed when I started were all the "themes" already available, which defined how a WordPress site looked. Themes include CSS files and templates which can make one site look radically different from another. In fact, because of themes, many sites you visit may be using WordPress and you'd never guess it. But WordPress also makes it easy to develop plugins that extend the capabilities available for WordPress users. As I write this, there are 1,656 themes available through WordPress.org, but there are 23,049 plugins available, and they have been downloaded nearly 400 million times. That's more than if every man, woman, and child in the U.S. each downloaded one plugin.

How can churches use WordPress?

At its simplest, WordPress is a great tool for blogging. If your church wants to have a blog, then WordPress is worthy of consideration. However, as noted above, WordPress has become a full-fledged content management system that churches could use for their entire website. Once a site is established, it's easy enough to use that any church administrator that knows how to use word processing software could keep the content up to date.

In fact, developers have leveraged WordPress' openness to develop themes and plugins specifically for churches. There are also web development and hosting firms that focus on helping churches establish and maintain a WordPress-based website. Jack Lamb identified over a dozen resources for church websites in his post at http://webdesignledger.com/resources/17-resources-for-churches-using-wordpress . He included 5 sources for themes, 6 plugins (for managing sermons, calendars, address books, photo galleries, prayer requests, etc.), and a couple of resource lists. A quick Google search for "WordPress for churches" can identify many other resources.

What about WordPress is powerful for churches?

By now, it's probably obvious that the main benefits of WordPress are that it's fairly easy to establish and maintain an attractive web presence using the software. The fact that WordPress is free and extensible is great. And because it's so popular, many people have invested their time to create extensions that are impressive and free. For those of us in ministry, impressive, easy, and free is a pretty compelling combination. The fact that it's easy enough to use that even pastors could make updates is just icing on the cake!

What is dangerous about WordPress for churches?

All that sounds too good to be true. Aren't there any downsides we need to consider?

Of course there always are, although admittedly, they aren't significant.

For starters, WordPress is open source and the plugins are open source. That brings with it many benefits that we've described above. However, it means that the software is freely available for hackers to examine. Also, with WordPress powering so many websites, hackers are attracted to the software. If they can find a way to exploit weaknesses in the software, then they could gain access to many sites. There have been a number of reports of widespread attacks on WordPress sites, although the WordPress community does a good job of responding quickly to mitigate the risks.

The challenge leads to the second concern with WordPress – the software is updated frequently, often to address security vulnerabilities. That means that whoever is the site administrator has to stay on top of these updates. It's not a huge time drain, but it is hard to know when updates will come, so you can't plan it into your schedule.

Constant updates to WordPress software leads to another challenge. Some updates make plugins or themes stop working. If the plugin developer is no longer actively supporting the plugin, you might need to figure out how to make it work with the WordPress core upgrade. Most plugins are relatively straightforward, so it's not a huge task for a tech savvy individual, but again probably not something you've built into your time budget.
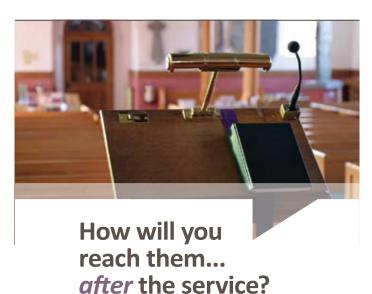
Which leads us to the final area of concern – plugins themselves. It's not hard for a plugin developer to include malicious code. Since we're all attracted to cool, free functionality, we can easily be tricked into compromising our sites. One piece of advice that seems wise is to, whenever possible, download plugins and themes from WordPress.org (which does some limited testing) and only download those with lots of downloads and reviews and a high ranking. Bestpluginsforwp.com also points to three plugins that can help protect your site in this posting: http://bestpluginsforwp.com/3-great-plugins-making-wordpress-theme-safe/#.T0xmY_Egc64.

Bottom Line

Although there's no such thing as a "free lunch," WordPress comes pretty close to providing a great platform for quickly and easily developing impressive websites. As Jesus warned, we are to "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16), but as He calls us to ministry on the web, I'm thankful that He has blessed us with tools like WordPress.

It is my hope and prayer that these articles on the power and danger of technology will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. Whether it is WordPress, the printing press, radio, television, personal computers, the Internet, the Cloud, mobility, or Wi-Fi, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God and to serve Him, wherever we go.

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 seven young men under Russ' direction.