

HOW
MARINERS
CHURCH
REFLECTS
THE
COMMUNITY

CHURCH FUEL



INSANELY PRACTICAL | EVERY MONTH

How Mariners Church Reflects the Community

Technically, California has a subarctic climate with some areas trending semi-arid in the winter and others skewing sub-tropical in the summer.

But that's just a fancy way to say "perfect."

Ask people who used to live in California what they miss and they will tell you the weather. Then ask people who moved to California from just about anywhere else what they love about their state and they will tell you the weather.

It's 73 degrees on this late-fall morning, certainly giving credence to the "Best Weather" awards regularly distributed by various magazines.

The sun is shining and there's a cool breeze blowing from the Pacific Ocean. It's so nice you almost don't notice the traffic on the 405.

This is why people live here.

But the weather is just one contributing factor to the vibe that is Southern California. It's a country of free-spirited surfers and grown up Gidgets.

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I have a friend who moved his family to Southern California for six months. After ten years in commercial real estate in Atlanta, he wanted to detox before jumping into a new job.. He rented a house, drove cross-country and called it his sabbatical.



I asked Rob to describe his experience on the West Coast and here's what he said:

We loved southern California. For us, it was like finding a piece of ourselves that we didn't know was missing. For all the bad press about pretentiousness, we found a place that was raw and inviting. The people wanted to connect and were

filled with honesty and transparency. More times than not, when I was surfing or Shelley would meet someone on the beach, we'd have a real authentic conversation about life, ups and downs, exciting stuff that was going on and/or difficulties that were happening.

And SoCal is social. People loved to gather, connect, and get to know each other. It usually didn't take long for us to find out more, in a good way, than we thought we wanted to know. There was a sense of openness and people didn't waste a lot of time with surface conversations.

Like he stereotype, we found southern California to be very laid back and chill. People didn't rush to get anywhere and they weren't in a rush to leave. Things started late and no one seemed to care. Everything didn't have to be perfect.

Lance Wiedower says Southern California is a run along a scenic highway in the morning and sunsets over the Pacific Ocean next to a firepit at night.

But despite the perfect weather and the relaxed vibe, I'm not moving to California.

I'm not here to visit Hollywood or Disney Land and I didn't fly cross country to see the Lakers play basketball. I'm not here for pleasure; I'm here for work. I'm

here to check out Mariners Church, a multi-site church in Irvine. I'm here on a reconnaissance mission for you. Why?

We want you to learn from other churches.

Contrary to what some believe, great churches don't do everything well.

Ask the best of the best and they will share their shortcomings. They will tell you there are a lot of things they are trying and several things they are scraping together. But great churches do some things really well. While you shouldn't copy any one

church, you can learn a lot from what these churches do best.

So it's the 11am service at the Irvine location of Mariners Church.

Service times, directions and what

to expect were really clear on the website. Even from my phone, it was easy to navigate to the "I'm New" section. I read about kids programming, listened to some worship music, and learned about the more reflective worship experience in the chapel. The

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website prepared me well for what I would experience.



But it was nothing compared to the feeling of driving into the parking lot and walking around the campus.

Without ever walking inside or hearing the sermon, I was struck by the lesson I want to share with you today. My takeaway from Mariner's Church, and the one thing I think you should learn from this church, is this...

Your church should match your community.

This isn't a lesson for architects or church builders. And what I'm going to share in this case study shouldn't be limited to churches going through building campaigns or renovation projects. The lesson is much deeper

than that. Every pastor, every church leader needs to integrate this simple and subtle principle.

The Church of the Nativity

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, one of the oldest surviving Christian churches in the world, was commissioned by Constantine's mother, St. Helena shortly after Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The church was built over the cave where some say Jesus was born and is still a popular tourist site for every Holy Land trip. The church has been destroyed and rebuilt several times, but when the Ottoman's rebuilt it, they made the doorway very small.

Most say it required visitors to dismount from their horse, bow their heads, and enter the church in humility.

Today, form tends to follow function, meaning how a building will be used

largely determines how it is designed and constructed. But the Church of the Nativity illustrates how the design of a facility can inspire function.

Your facility can be more than a meeting place. Your physical environment can communicate something.

Now, back to modern times and my visit to Mariner's Church.

The Lobby is the Outside

I'm not a church facility expert, but walking around the campus of Mariner's Church, I can't help but notice a lot of intentionality. This wasn't a master plan



copied from any other church; it was created for a Southern California church.

People weren't rushing to get indoors, maybe because of the perfect weather, but definitely because the entire space was designed to connect.

There were people waiting on benches and others getting coffee and having conversations. People didn't seem to hurry from checking in their kids to get to the worship service, maybe because the environment was so welcoming.

The worship center doesn't have a giant lobby – the entire outside is the lobby. Who needs a vestibule or a narthex or a foyer when you can stand around outside? If your church is in Michigan or even Atlanta, this might not be

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possible. But here in Southern California, you get to incorporate the outside into your master plan.

To my left is the worship center, with doors opening up right into the building. There's a café and a bookstore, but it's not hidden in a corner. It's a legitimate café, serving a full breakfast menu to hundreds of people. People can order an omelet and grab one of out the outdoor seats, and watch the service with family and friends.

To my right is a children's building and a huge playground. Ahead of me is an older building, renovated into a chapel. And beside that is a student building and family life center. Seating areas are everywhere and individual ministries have tents where they can connect with people and provide information.

It's one of the first churches I've visited that truly felt like a campus. That word is so overused. But Mariner's Church really does feel like a campus and not a building.

It's peaceful and green. It's open and inviting. As ridiculous as it might sound, it feels like an oasis. All the things people say about the weather and the vibe of Southern California can be said about the feeling you get when you walk around Mariner's Church.

It's the best church facility I've seen. Everything is nice but nothing is over the top. It is quality, like a heavy glass that feels expensive in your hand.

If you're about to build, renovate, or expand, it's worth taking a trip to Mariner's to experience it for



yourself. But even if a new building isn't in your future, you can learn

from this. There's something important here for you.

Every pastor and every church leader should be able to answer these three questions.

#1 - Does your facility reflect your community?

When you walk from the lobby through the hallways and into the worship center, how do you feel?

Chances are, you don't feel much because you've made that walk so many times. But for those coming to your church for the first time, the vibe of your building communicates far more than the person making announcements. Your church building actually says something about your church. Your facility speaks just as much as the pastor.

Too many church buildings are simply functional spaces for people to gather and meet and learn. But they can be so much more than that.

Too many pastors don't realize their facility can welcome people long before a greeter or an associate pastor ever can. Your facility can make people feel welcome.

A great church facility says, "We know you...we're one of you...and this place is home." That's not touchy-feeling non-sense. It's intentional architecture and useful design.

Looking at your church building through the eyes of the community is a subtle step toward being a church that's FOR the community. Like a missionary contextualizes the gospel so it can be understood in a particular culture, a church facility should be contextualized to help local people feel at home.

Let me say it another way. Churches in the Pacific Northwest should feel more like homes in the Pacific Northwest rather than churches in the South. Design and decorate for people in your community, not to emulate cool churches across the country.

Mariners Church feels like California. So what does your church feel like? Does it match your community, or is it a stand-alone building just for people to gather?

You don't need a new master plan, a new worship center or a total renovation job to incorporate the feel of your community. And making your building match your community doesn't have to be an expensive endeavor. You can start here: Hang pictures of your town or display local artwork.

I have a designer friend who now recommends local photography as a part of every branding project. I love that, because your church isn't full of stock people and your community isn't a stock image. You can bring the community into your church facility by displaying local images.



#2 - Does your brand match your community?

A good church brand reflects your community, not just your church. If your church is in Brooklyn, your logo and design elements should look like Brooklyn. If your church is in California, your brand and design should feel like California. Again,

leave the stock images behind, because they don't reflect who you are as a church. Repurposing space can get expensive, but start with your brand, signs and website and take it from there.

Interior designers incorporate local style into their work. Graphic designers know a logo that works in Texas might not connect with people in Baltimore. And when you go to Maine you eat lobster.

All of this is true because there's a strong pull towards whatever is local. The signs in your facility should feel like the people in your zip code belong there. Your building should feel natural. It should invite people in.

Your church isn't a generic structure dropped into a random city. It's a gathering place where people in your specific community can hear the life-changing message of Jesus. The very place you meet is a platform for the most important message in the

world. And just like you communicate the gospel in a language local people can understand, your brand should reflect the vibe of your city.

#3 - Do the ministries of your church reflect your community?

When you walk on the campus of Mariners Church or walk through the various buildings, you know you're at a church in Southern California. This isn't accidental; it's intentional.

But beyond the facility, there's a much more important way you can match your community and serve them well. In a way, this a less expensive but more important way your church can reflect your city.

The ministries you offer should be designed with your specific community in mind.

A lot of ministries begin this way. A visionary leader has the heart to solve a problem. Money is raised, volunteers are recruited and ministries are started.

But over time, the community changes. All the while, the church holds on to older ministries that used to work.

When the needs of the community change, the ministries of the church should change as well.

Legacy ministries that used to work are not a good use of the resources God has given your church. And ministries that don't truly meet the needs of the community aren't going to help the church reach anyone.

I was talking with my friend Matt about this very phenomenon. He told me about a church that started a summer program for kids that was successful about 20 years ago. Back then, a lot of people came to the

church because of this particular ministry.

But over the last 20 years, the community grew older. It wasn't a place for young families anymore, but instead of the church changing, they held tighter to their children's program. They kept pouring resources into a program that used to work, and a program they wished work, all the while ignoring the new opportunity they had to serve an aging population.

I have another friend named Gary who started a church in a part of town associated with homelessness. Instead of importing ministries that work in suburban churches, this church has embraced their role and started a homeless shelter and food pantry. This was a big need of the area, and the church decided to meet it. They weren't content to lead ministries that worked in other parts of the country or even other parts of the city. They designed ministries to serve the people in their own backyard. They matched the ministries of the church to the needs

of the community, even when it required saying no to things other churches did successfully.

Take a look at the ministries your church offers. Do they really match your community?

Just because the church down the street has a student ministry doesn't mean you need to have a student ministry? Is there a compelling reason to have a women's ministry or a men's ministry? (or just a few loud voices who loved it at their last church). Do you need a preschool or a food pantry, or are those needs well-covered by other organizations.

I know. These are tough questions.

Rick Warren, the pastor of another great church in California, says:

I can't list for you the needs of the unchurched in your community. Every community is unique. I know of a church that discovered through a survey that the number one felt need in their community was potty-training for preschoolers! The area was filled with young couples who wanted help with it. Rather than ignore this need as "unspiritual," they used it as an opportunity for evangelism.



The church held a "Parenting Preschoolers" conference which, among other things, taught this vital skill. Later the pastor joked that their biblical basis was Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go!"

The idea is funny but the results were serious. Through that initial contact, dozens of couples were reached for Christ.

This is a great example of a church matching their ministries to the needs of the community. Just like your facility should reflect your community, your ministries need to meet the needs of your community.

A bunch of ministries will keep you busy, but the right ministries will help your church be effective.

A bunch of ministries will make you feel good, but the right ministries will help your church make a difference.

[If you need to stop doing a ministry that's no longer effective, read this article.](#)

#3 - Does the style of your service represent the people in attendance?

Wal-Mart doesn't invest a lot of money in store displays or fancy lighting. Do you know why? Because their target customer is more interested in low prices than nice environments.

Nordstrom, on the other hand, invests more than the industry average into customer service training. Why? Because their target customer cares more about the experience and is willing to pay a premium.

Why does this matter to the church?

Because knowing your audience is the first step in reaching your audience.

Every preaching workshop, writing workshop and business workshop I've attended talked about how important it was to know the audience. That leads me to ask a really important question.

Are you designing your church service with people in mind?

Most churches do a good job designing church services with the *Bible* in mind. You know a church service isn't for entertainment – you know there's something eternal at stake. So you work hard on the sermon and you choose songs that have spiritual meaning. You want your church service to honor God, so you don't take it lightly.

But you should also design church services with *people* in mind. After all, people will sit in the pews (or chairs). A worship service isn't a private event between you and God, it's a public event that's open to all. That's why it's critical to match the flavor of your service to your community.

Your church service doesn't happen in a vacuum and isn't solely for God's benefit. It's participatory, and you want people there. So it's only wise

to think through what happens in your church service through the lens of those who will be participating.

Here's one quick example.

Did you know that in 1950, 43% of households in the United States were married couples with children. By 2010, that number had dropped to just 20%. (Source: <http://nyti.ms/jQKBnz>) In other words, most families in your church are not comprised of a mom, dad and children. Yet how many sermon illustrations incorporate the traditional family? Of course it's not wrong, but it might be a sign you don't know your community (or church) as well as you should.

Though Tim Keller speaks to a worldwide audience through his books and podcast, he speaks to highly-educated, upper-East side New Yorkers on Sunday morning. And his message sounds appropriate for such an audience. He's authentic,

yet formal. He's conversational, yet carefully reasoned.

Though Andy Stanley communicates to young adults on a television broadcast following Saturday Night Live, he speaks to young



professionals and business people in Atlanta every week. Listen carefully and you might hear him say phrases like “whatever is in your 401k” or “what happened in your previous marriage.” Those words aren’t accidental – he’s matching his message to who he knows is in the audience.

Your sermon – your music – your entire church service should be designed with real people in mind.

The service at Mariner’s Church was delightfully simple. There were four songs, a welcome segment from a funny and engaging speaker, a short video announcement, and a message from a guest speaker.

But everything out the service matched everything I knew about the church. The service seemed like a service in Southern California should be. Everyone on the stage reflected the understood values of the church.

Maybe you don’t know your congregation/community as well as you’d like. Here are three things you can do to bridge the gap.

1. Start with a survey.

It’s really simple, but a short survey can help you get to know your church. Why not take 3-5 minutes in

a church service and ask people to give you feedback. Think of how valuable this could be.

A survey can give you demographic (who are they) and psychographic (what do they like) information on the people who attend your church. You can ask them their favorite songs (they might not be the same as your worship leader's answers) or what topic they would like to hear in a sermon (that might be surprising to the senior pastor).

Do this at least once a year and make it a big deal.

Here's a simple Word document you can use. Change it, customize it, and make it fit your setting. Or come up with your own.

2. Talk to people.

Don't be so busy on Sunday that you miss moments to interact with real people. You might not have time for a deep conversation, but you can take it one level deeper than small talk. Here are some questions you can ask people:

- What's been your favorite message so far this year?
- What kind of music do you like?
- What are you most excited about next year?
- Do you have a big trip or vacation on the horizon?
- Do you have friends in town that don't go to church?
- How could we better serve your kids or teenagers?

These kind of questions could lead to quick conversations and really help you understand what is going on in the life of the people at your church.

Periodically sit down with someone and have a more in-depth conversation about life.

You don't know what it's like to be a schoolteacher, insurance agent, or cashier. And you may not remember what it's like not to be a Christ-follower. That's why intentional learning conversations can be so valuable to you as a church leader.

Meet with someone over coffee and ask questions like:

- What are your biggest questions about the Bible?
- What are you most worried about in our society?
- What's it like to be a Christian in your work place?
- What do you see in our church that needs attention?

It might require a little bravery, but you'll find people are usually willing to share their experiences and talk about their lives. And what you learn will help you minister to them and dozens of others like them.

When you truly get to know the people in your church, you might just find that your ministry to them becomes far more effective.

Making it Match

Mariners Church does many things well. Visit



and you'll walk away with lots of ideas of your own.

You'll also walk away with an impression – a feeling that this Southern California church knows who they are and who they are reaching. That's no small task.

But it's worth it because as your church reflects your community, you will be in a better position to reach your community.

When you position your church as a part of the community - as an insider with something to contribute not a service provider with something to sell – more doors will open for you.

