

“It's Our Church”

Young Korean Americans Seek Spiritual Freedom

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In a dimly lit auditorium, a band belts out love songs that pulsate with electric guitars and Front Page drums. About 100 young, casually dressed Korean Americans--and a smattering of non-Koreans--sway and clap in rhythm. On Our Site Metro Section Soon, the fast-talking, fast-moving pastor, the Traffic Rev. Ray Chang, bounds onto the stage. This Sunday Education morning's message, he says, is about how Jesus is Communities like Regis--how the son of God and game show host Philbin both ask million-dollar questions. The parishioners of Ambassador Bible Church in Falls Church burst into laughter. A few gasp and shake their heads, pleasantly surprised Chang is making such a reference in his sermon--something their parents certainly wouldn't understand or like.

Going to church has long defined the lives of most Korean immigrants, but many young Korean Americans are leaving the conservative, insular ministries their parents built and are creating their own multiethnic institutions. Ambassador and about 30 Korean American ministries nationwide are second-generation churches, serving the people born and raised in this country.

But as they make a new space to pray, young Korean Americans often confront the stern disapproval of their parents and community. The older generation sees the move to separate churches as tantamount to abandoning their heritage.

"In the way that they leave, they break up the church, and it's like a breakup of the family," said the Rev. Kwang Sam Na, 57, of Great Multitude Presbyterian Church in Silver Spring.

The old ways left Chang cold. He was raised in a traditional Korean church, but often hung out in the parking lot with friends because he couldn't understand the sermons delivered in Korean.

"As Asian Americans, our values are a little bit different," said Chang, 33, who was 6 when his family emigrated. "There isn't that understanding of the motherland. This provides an opportunity to come back to church without all the cultural expectations."

About 200 traditional Korean churches dot the area, serving many of the estimated 100,000 Koreans who make up the region's second-largest immigrant group (Salvadorans are first). There are at least three second-generation churches-- Ambassador and Lighthouse Community and Agape Mission churches, both in Columbia.

Groups such as Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans have English-language churches. But the Korean community is more conflicted about the ministries, clergy leaders and scholars say.

The church has served not only as a spiritual sanctuary, but also as a social center that preserved Korean culture, particularly for the large number of members who arrived in the United States in the mid-1960s after immigration laws were relaxed. Charities focused on the homeland. Classes instructed youngsters on language.

Most people in the first major wave of Korean immigration were Christians who lived in big cities and were westernized, and thus more likely to leave. The churches they built encouraged later immigrants to convert from religions such as Buddhism to Christianity.

Clergy leaders and scholars estimate that up to 70 percent of Korean immigrants are Christians--mostly Presbyterian and Baptist--compared with more than 20 percent in Korea. In America, about one church has been formed for every 500 Koreans, a growth that has led immigrants to joke, "The Chinese build restaurants, the Koreans build churches."

But inevitably, the needs of the children turned out to be different from those of their parents. The result was what the Korean community called the "silent exodus." Clergy members estimated that more than 60 percent of young Korean Americans dropped out of immigrant churches. They joined non-Korean congregations or just stopped going to church.

Many churches are trying to keep younger members by offering youth groups or English-language ministries. "We don't want to abandon the boat," said the Rev. Paul Kim, 41, of Korean Orthodox Presbyterian in McLean, who has led its Korean and English ministries. "If you look at families, there are a lot of different members. It is a biblical model of the church--all generations under one roof, serving God."

[spacer]But when Chang came to the area in 1993 from southern California to head an English ministry at Korean Central Presbyterian Church in Vienna, tensions arose between the older congregation of 2,000 and the younger ministry of 100. The English ministry had to worship on Sunday afternoons, after Korean services. Some elders complained about the pop music. When Chang asked for a separate budget, older leaders balked.

"Koreans are influenced by Confucianism," said the Rev. Won Sang Lee, 61. "You are to respect the older people, and you're to pass down your heritage. First generation would like to supervise and guide."

Other churches have experienced more disruptive conflicts. Many English ministry pastors leave in frustration after about a year, clergy leaders say. Last year, an editorial in a Korean-language newspaper rebuked a Silver Spring church for allowing a wedding to be performed only in English.

At Korean Central Presbyterian, the English ministry was gradually allowed more freedom. Chang credited the changes to Lee, whom he called progressive.

Still, Chang dreamed of forming a multiethnic church. Chang remembered that as a teenager, he was admonished for bringing non-Koreans to church.

"The question is, are we going to be able to impact a culture broader than our immigrant culture?" Chang said. "If I was going to reach more people, I was going to have to go outside the Korean American church."

In 1996, he began Ambassador in his home with 11 members. Later, services moved to the George Mason High School auditorium. Although the church started out Korean American, it has become more diverse. About a dozen of the 120 congregants are Chinese American, a dozen are white and a handful fall into other groups.

Some parishioners said their parents wondered why they joined, asking: Can young people really support a church? What if there aren't enough Koreans? When are you coming back?

Helen Oh, who had previously attended Korean Central Presbyterian, said she misses having older church members as mentors.

But she won't go back. "We feel a great sense of ownership," said Oh, 31, of Vienna. "It's our church. It's not our parents'."

Jay D'Alessandro, of Burke, said he didn't feel comfortable at other churches. D'Alessandro, whose mother was Korean and whose father was white, attended a mostly white Presbyterian church while growing up. He briefly attended a Korean church with his Korean American wife, but he said many members didn't talk to him because he didn't look Korean.

"It's definitely a different feeling, coming to Ambassador," said D'Alessandro, 29. "You see couples that are interracial and it's just neat."

Some scholars expect the second-generation churches to continue growing. More Korean Americans are marrying outside their ethnicity and the country is becoming more diverse, said Peter Cha, who teaches at Trinity Evangelical School in Chicago.

One of the pioneering second-generation ministries, Newsong Community Church in Irvine, Calif., reports a membership boom from eight to nearly 900 in five years. Twenty percent of its members are white or black.

"One's ability to go beyond your culture and go into someone else's cultural boundaries is now a cool thing," Cha said.

But it's not likely Korean churches will die out, said Sang Hyun Lee, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. Koreans can't blend into mainstream culture as easily as Americans of European descent, he said.

Won Sang Lee, of Korean Central Presbyterian, predicted many Korean Americans eventually may worship in English, but he believes they can maintain their ethnic identity, like Jews.

Chang also believes that traditional Korean churches or a Korean identity in America will not disappear. "We don't want to reject our heritage," he said. "We just want to separate it from faith issues."

On Sunday, the Ambassador congregation stops clapping in rhythm just before Chang appears on stage. Chang preaches in a navy suit--clearly overdressed compared with his congregation. He grew up in a Korean family, he said, and he just can't shake some conservative habits.

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