

Pan-Asian Churches Emerging

Some Southland congregations break the mold, courting other ethnic groups rather than staying insular to preserve culture. Scholars see a blueprint for the region's future.

By TINI TRAN, Times Staff Writer

In a recent Sunday morning, a predominantly Asian, young and casually dressed crowd spilled into the Elks Lodge in Santa Ana. The excited buzz, and the rock band on stage, suggested a college party.

In fact, it was the start of services at Newsong Community Church, one of a new generation of Korean American congregations that is drawing together the disparate segments of Southern California's burgeoning Asian population.

With its Web page, catchy slogan-"A real place for unreal times"-and hip young pastor, Newsong is attracting not just young Korean Americans, but other Asian congregants as well.

Newsong and churches like it are becoming the first truly pan-Asian churches in the country, drawing a mix of second-, third-and even fourth-generation Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and other Asians, whose Americanized upbringing and Christian faith bind ethnically diverse backgrounds.

For Newsong Pastor David Gibbons, that mix was a key goal from the start. "I made it clear from the beginning that I was interested in diversity," said Gibbons. "The church may have started out Korean American, but it didn't stay that way."

The 4-year-old church that began with eight people in his Irvine living room has now grown to 700-plus members. Equally astounding are its demographics: The average age of members is 28. About 15% are college age, and 65% are single. About 35% are Chinese, 35% are Korean, 10% are other Asian, 17% Caucasian and 3% African American and Latino.

Religious scholars say the phenomenon of Korean churches embracing other Asian American worshipers is striking because immigrant churches typically remain insular as a way to preserve identity, culture and language.

"Churches have always self-segregated, for many different reasons. These mixed congregations are really a new trend,"

said Sung Do Kang, director of the Asian Center at the Claremont School of Theology.

The 40 or so second-generation churches that have sprung up in the last decade make up only a fraction of the 1,000 or so Korean American churches planted between Santa Barbara and San Diego. But they provide a glimpse of a future in which multiethnic congregations will be the norm, said Pastor Sukhwan Oh of Oikos Church in Bellflower. By 2020, Asian Americans-already the fastest-growing ethnic group in the country-will be 13% of the nation's population. That dictates the need to be more inclusive, he said.

"When I began my ministry eight years ago, I wanted to reach out to Asian America," he said. "Research had come out that 72% of Korean American girls were marrying non-Koreans, so it wouldn't make any sense to start an exclusively Korean church. We had to be smart about this."

Breaking Down the Walls

Billy Graham and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. were among the first to observe decades ago that Sunday mornings were America's most segregated hour. In general, religious institutions have made little progress in diversifying their congregations since then, said Benjamin Hubbard, professor of comparative religion at Cal State Fullerton. With the exception of the Roman Catholic Church, with its heavy Latino and Asian following, and a few nondenominational churches, mixed congregations remain an elusive goal.

That it is happening within Korean American churches is a signal of the emergence of a pan-Asian identity, said Edward Chang, an ethnic studies professor at UC Riverside. "It's a reflection of a new multicultural America," he said. "In the '70s and '80s, there was so much pressure to assimilate . . . to mingle into the mainstream where you become invisible. But in the '90s, you can maintain a unique ethnic identity and still participate in mainstream America."

It is that common heritage that gives strength to the new pan-Asian churches. They build membership through friendship networks," said Sharon Kim, a USC doctoral student who has been studying the phenomenon.

"Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese, they all grow up together and go to school together," she said. "They have more in common as Asian Americans than they do as separate ethnic groups. People identify themselves in racial categories because of their day-to-day experiences. They're treated as Asian Americans as opposed to Chinese Americans or Japanese Americans."

Historically, Korean churches have served not only as spiritual havens but as social centers for their communities, which rapidly expanded with waves of immigrants beginning in the 1960s. Many would go to church seeking advice on where to learn English and how to find a job. They could pray to God, find a spouse and make business connections.

"It served as a place of belonging for people who had left behind their native country," said Pastor Jim-Bob Park of Young Nak Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, the largest Korean church in Southern California with 8,000 members.

"Because they had no standing in U.S. society, they could find positions in church as deacons, elders, etc., that gave them a place of leadership within the community. Churches just boomed."

Typically, these churches—among them Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist—were small, with fewer than 100 members. But some thrived and became mega-churches of 5,000 or more. Elders even joked about their missionary zeal—Chinese immigrants started restaurants, while Korean immigrants started churches.

But the emphasis was always solidly focused on the motherland. Sermons were in Korean. Charity benefits aided disaster victims in Korea.

That became a problem. Informal studies by the Christian Korean American Alliance in the early '90s found that up to 70% of Korean Americans in their 20s and 30s stopped attending church because they couldn't understand Korean well enough to be inspired by sermons. It was dubbed "the silent exodus."

Younger members born or raised in the United States couldn't relate to the church's ethnocentric focus. And the gaps were more than just language. The independent, egalitarian values of the younger generation often conflicted with the beliefs of their parents, raised on Confucian principles of deferring to age and authority.

"In Asian culture, it's a very hierarchical system," said Park. "The older generation sees the younger ones in their 20s, 30s, and even 40s as kids. In life, they can be a successful person, but in the church, they are still regarded as children. That's the dilemma. The older generation doesn't want to give the responsibility and ownership of the church to the next generation."

The Genesis of Change

In the last decade, aware of the growing tensions between generations, church elders tried to retain younger members by providing headsets for sermon translations and attracting English-speaking pastors.

But the friction started the phenomenon of breakaway, second-generation churches. These new churches have flourished, said USC's Kim, in part because Christianity has a strong link with Korean Americans. A 1992 study found that about 70% of Korean Americans regularly attend church.

"There was a foundation of faith laid for many young people as children. Even if they no longer felt comfortable in their parents' church, [it] didn't mean they didn't want some other spiritual home," said Kim.

She believes the churches' growth accelerated after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, when many Korean American businesses were attacked. Many young Korean Americans were disappointed by the response of religious leaders in being a voice for the community during that period.

"The church was supposed to represent the community, but as an institution, they were very disconnected from the American mainstream," Kim said. "First-generation pastors couldn't communicate well in English; they didn't know how to reach the mass media. The churches themselves were disorganized and disconnected from each other. I think many young pastors saw that and were very frustrated. That's when they began setting up their own ministries."

Finding a Comfort Level

The second-generation churches now spread throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties are markedly different from their predecessors: pastors embrace an informal, contemporary style of worship. Church decisions are made in an egalitarian fashion. Pastors are treated not so much as religious leaders, but as spiritual peers.

It was for those reasons that Jeanette Lee, a minister's daughter, sought a place like the Newsong Community Church.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable in just a Korean church," said Lee, 26, of La Mirada. "We're becoming more diverse as a society, and we want to worship that way. We're not our parents. I think we're making up our own culture."

Gibbons, Newsong's 36-year-old pastor, is virtually a poster child for the multiracial, multiethnic church he heads. He is

the son of a white U.S. military man and a Korean mother, and the husband of a white woman.

He left behind a traditional Presbyterian church to set up his own house of worship. His target: the young generation that had begun drifting from immigrant churches.

His remarkable success has created the problem of finding a permanent home that is large enough. Newsong's congregation moves every week to a different location-like a religious rave party. They have worshiped in hotel conference rooms and convention centers, even a public park, when they couldn't find space.

At the recent service in Santa Ana, hundreds of folding chairs were set up to accommodate the two services of the day. The rock band-complete with electric guitarist, bass player and drummer-took center stage. A projector displayed words to the hymns on two large screens up front. Once percussion took over, the hand clapping began.

It was the rousing start to an hourlong sermon in English on "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," the title of a discussion of Ecclesiastes. Sprinkling the sermon with references to his mother's death by a drunken driver as well as his favorite cologne, Gibbons struck a conversational tone-part of the church's signature informal style.

Chap Yaep, a 25-year-old Chinese American animator from Irvine, has been a faithful attendee for the last year and a half. Though he didn't grow up in a church, he'd been looking for one, and stumbled across Newsong through friends.

"This wasn't a stereotypical church experience. I'd attended churches that were dominantly Chinese or Caucasian," he said. "I thought it was cool that this was a different mix. That's the way things should be. I think with this generation, people are much more used to diversity. With the culture, TV and the Internet, people are much more exposed to different things."

The message these churches send out is equally appealing to other non-Korean Asian Americans who are looking for a spiritual base.

"What our generation is looking for is a safe place where they belong," Gibbons said. "This is for the misfits and prodigal sons-the ones who don't feel they have a place in their parents' church. This is my generation, and I don't want to see them wandering."