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## Ambassador for diversity

By JIM HINCH  
The Orange County Register

ANAHEIM – The sermon started with a Levi's commercial. A man and a woman, projected on screens behind the pulpit, hurtled in a race through brick walls. They paused to catch their breath in a forest, then raced up the trunk of a tree, finally launching themselves into space. Pastor Ray Chang bounded to the stage of Ambassador Church, founded a few months ago in a nondescript office park to "make disciples of all nationalities," as the church motto states.

He stared at about 80 upturned Asian faces, gestured at the commercial and said: "How can we break through to the other side as we prepare to transition to reaching people of all backgrounds? ... How can we become a church for all people?"

The launch of Ambassador Church, a small Asian congregation that has met since July and hopes to broaden its ethnic base at a grand-opening service Sunday, is an illustration of the promise and peril evangelical Christian churches face in the ethnic melting pot of Orange County.

While once-homogenous housing tracts fill with immigrants and residents from an array of socio-economic backgrounds, many churches find that "Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America," said Dale Burke, pastor of First Evangelical Free Church in Fullerton.

Evangelical churches have an especially hard time reaching changing communities because their members, rather than attending neighborhood parishes as Catholics do, travel to churches that fit their lifestyles and worship preferences, said Ryan Bolger, professor of church and contemporary culture at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena.

Chang's Ambassador Church, an offshoot of First Evangelical Free that receives financial backing from the Fullerton church, began as a First Evangelical Free Bible study designed to reach out to rapidly changing surroundings.

Since 1990, north Orange County cities – Anaheim, Brea, Buena Park, Cypress, Fullerton, La Habra, La Palma, Placentia, Villa Park and Yorba Linda – went



LOOKING TO DIVERSIFY: Parishioners sing during a service at Ambassador Church in Anaheim, which hopes to build a multicultural congregation.

JEBB HARRIS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER






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ETHNICITY, RELIGION
A sampling of some prominent churches:
<b>First-generation Asian immigrant:</b>
• Evergreen Baptist Church, Rosemead
• Grace Ministries International, Fullerton
• Sarang Presbyterian Church,



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from 64 percent to 47 percent white, the U.S. Census said.

Hispanic and Asian populations rose 66 percent and 55 percent, respectively. The region's 325,000 Hispanics are now 35 percent of its total population. Asians, who number 127,000, are 14 percent of the population.

Chang, the son of Korean immigrants who grew up in Irvine and trained at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, was hired by First Evangelical Free three years ago to reach a nonchurch-going slice of that demographic change: The young-adult children of first-generation Asian immigrants.

While many Orange County Hispanics attend either Catholic or Pentecostal churches, Chinese and Korean immigrants who flocked to North Orange County in search of good schools founded large Asian-language evangelical churches such as Sarang Presbyterian Church in Anaheim and Grace Ministries International in Fullerton, Bolger said.

Now, as the sons and daughters of those immigrants enter their 20s and 30s, many find themselves alienated from their parents' formal, hierarchical Asian-language churches but culturally uncomfortable in largely white congregations such as First Evangelical Free, Chang said.

As Chang's Sunday morning Bible study took off, attracting growing numbers of young Asian couples and singles, he noticed that few of his members were staying to attend First Evangelical Free services, which are attended predominantly by white worshippers.

First Evangelical Free "wanted to integrate people, but when a church is mostly Anglo, it's very hard," Chang said. So, he and Burke decided that both their aims would be better accomplished with an Asian offshoot, where newcomers would feel more welcome, and a new worship service at Fullerton aimed at a more general multiethnic audience.

Starting in October, First Evangelical Free will add a third service to its Sunday lineup, featuring music and musicians of many nationalities.

"My prayer is that our church will soon reflect the diversity of the Brea Mall on a busy day," Burke said.

Bolger said the experience of First Evangelical Free and Ambassador illustrates the complexities churches face as their communities change.

While it's highly unusual and encouraging that a largely white church has produced an all-Asian offshoot, Ambassador's decision to go it alone instead of merging with First Evangelical Free suggests that the desire for cultural homogeneity in worship remains strong, Bolger said.

In Southern California, evangelical churches tend to fall into lifestyle categories, Bolger said. Megachurches like Saddleback Church in Lake Forest and Mariners Church in Newport Beach, which try to appeal to the masses with their informal style, attract middle-aged professionals and their families, reflecting the demographics of relatively affluent surroundings.

Calvary Chapels and Vineyard churches attract a broader socioeconomic range. Pentecostal churches, which have mounted successful evangelism efforts in Latin

Anaheim

- Young Nak Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles

Los Angeles

Second-generation Asian:

- Ambassador Church, Anaheim
- Newsong Church, Irvinex

**Ethnically diverse evangelical churches:**

- Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa
- Cottonwood Christian Center, Los Alamitos
- Mosaic Church, Los Angeles

America, are popular with Hispanic immigrants.

First Evangelical Free Church began in a community similar to those around Saddleback and Mariners. But while those churches' surroundings have remained relatively stable, Fullerton and nearby cities have changed dramatically, thrusting First Evangelical Free and Ambassador into the forefront of evangelicals' efforts to diversify, Bolger said.

Ambassador's small size, rock music and American flavor – sermons make heavy use of multimedia like the Levi's commercial – have attracted a steadily growing congregation of Asians in their 20s and 30s. Chang said he wants his church to reach all ethnicities, but he admits it's hard.

Worshippers have held free community car washes and joined an Anaheim softball league in efforts to invite people of all backgrounds to Sunday's grand-opening service. But so far, only two in a congregation of 80 are non-Asian.

Kevin Ross, 30, an Asian raised by white adoptive parents, said he and his wife, Betty, settled on Ambassador after first attending a Chinese Baptist Church in Alhambra and several large evangelical churches in Orange County.

The Baptist church was too formal and the evangelical churches, which attracted a broad socio-economic mix, were too culturally different, said Ross.

"This is where we feel our hearts touched," he said of Ambassador, where he was invited to dinner at his first visit and sits next to like-minded worshippers in shorts and sandals.

Asked about the church's multicultural mission, he pointed to the congregation's sea of Asian faces and conceded that, so far, Ambassador's ethnic ambitions are mostly reflected in the open attitude of members.

Said Chang: "A lot of churches want to become multiethnic, but the question is: How do you do it?"

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Ambassador Church's grand-opening services take place at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. Sunday at 2568 W. Woodland Drive, Anaheim. Information: (714) 816-1719.

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