

O.C. exports Asian American churches to the world

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D.J. Chuang has ideas about Asian American churches.

Lots of ideas.

He has ideas about online-only Asian churches, about so-called “next-gen multi-Asian churches,” and about churches frequented by Asian Indian, Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese worshippers.

Chuang, 46, a Taiwanese-born church consultant/social media guru/faith entrepreneur, keeps searchable databases of all these kinds of churches, and more, on his consulting website.

Also on the website: a guide to Asian American youth ministry, links to the online Asian pop culture magazine Giant Robot, and a page dedicated to explaining why Yogurtland is an Asian foodie's delight (think lactose-intolerance-friendly and self-serve gadgetry).

Chuang has so many ideas about the fast-growing world of Asian American Christianity, he devotes an entire section of his website to them, under a tab labeled “Ideas.” Actually, there are two tabs; the second one is labeled “Even More Ideas.”

One of the “Even More Ideas” is about bipolar disorder, a condition with which Chuang is intimately familiar. But more about that later.

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The first thing to know about Chuang, who lives with his wife and son in Aliso Viejo and works as a consultant for churches and Christian organizations nationwide, is that he is one of the most networked, knowledgeable and restless experts on Asian American Christianity at a time when Asians have become America's fastest-growing ethnic group.

Also, it's no accident Chuang lives in Orange County, where a population of roughly 562,000 Asians comprises one of America's largest and most densely populated Asian communities.

Long the birthplace of trends in American Christianity, Orange County is exporting a new and influential style of Asian American worship. Church innovations that took root here – multiethnic congregations, pastors preaching in T-shirts and jeans, extensive use of social media, inner-city ministry – are spreading around the globe.

“Culturally speaking, Orange County is open space, so it frees up people to imagine new things,” Chuang said. “It's an enterprising place.”

Nationwide, 42 percent of America's 18.2 million Asians are Christian, according to the Pew Research Center. Until recently, most of those worshippers attended churches geared toward first-generation immigrants craving the sort of monocultural, hierarchical, morally strict faith communities they left behind.

Now, as second- and third-generation children of Asian migrants come of age, they are creating churches

almost unrecognizable to their forebears.

At Newsong church in Irvine, where each Sunday more than 1,500 worshippers from 15 Asian cultures gather alongside whites, African Americans and Latinos in a cavernous warehouselike hall, pastor Dave Gibbons, who is half-Korean, inveighs against behavior such as masking failure to avoid shaming one's family.

Newsong members have started ministries in Los Angeles' historically black Crenshaw District, among the homeless in downtown Santa Ana and in a roster of global cities, including London, Mexico City, Bangkok and Mysore, India.

Ambassador Church in Brea, which started 10 years ago in a rented office building in Anaheim, leads a growing network of multiethnic churches in Hollywood, Colorado and, soon, Vancouver, Canada.

The church runs a church-planting training program that shows aspiring pastors how to adapt to new settings by reaching beyond traditional Asian communities.

At Epic Church in downtown Fullerton, a onetime offshoot of a historically Japanese church in Los Angeles, homeless people are members and nearly half the congregation isn't Asian.

"When I talk to people in Toronto or Vancouver or New York, they say, 'We're 15 or 20 years behind you,'" said Ken Fong, pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church in Rosemead, the parent church of Fullerton's Epic Church. "They say, 'Wow, we're not even close' to adopting changes already common in California."

Fong, who in 1999 wrote a book forecasting a more informal, multi-ethnic future for Asian American Christianity, said Epic Church and other ministries in Los Angeles and Orange County are at the vanguard of church innovation.

"The student has become the teacher," Fong said of Epic's pastor, Kevin Doi, who grew up at Evergreen and was mentored by Fong.

Or, as Doi put it, worshipping in diverse downtown Fullerton forced Epic's members to think what it meant to "love and be friends with people who are different from us."

This rapidly changing landscape of Asian American ministry is D.J. Chuang's livelihood and his intellectual obsession. The stakes for him are personal. Chuang grew up the eldest son of strict, morally austere Taiwanese parents who immigrated to America in 1974 when Chuang was 8. The family ran a motel in northern Virginia.

In part to please his father, Chuang studied computer engineering in college and worked for two years for a government contractor near Washington, D.C. He said the day he told his father he wanted to leave his job and go to seminary "was one of the fear and trembling kinds of conversations."

Chuang graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary in 1995 and worked as a pastor at a traditional Chinese church in North Carolina, and at a smaller church in Virginia aimed at second-generation immigrants.

Both jobs left him dissatisfied.

"I'm an experimenter," Chuang said. "My heart is in the church, the Asian American church. But church is not known for being a place of research and development."

Chuang left formal ministry and became a consultant, working for churches, parachurch organizations and Christian nonprofits, always aiming to help Asian American Christians become more digitally savvy and culturally responsive.

He's helping Brea's Ambassador Church expand its network of sister churches and advising La Mirada's Talbot Seminary as it develops one of America's first doctoral programs in Asian American ministry.

Chuang is a manic presence, especially online. He was, he says, the first person in Orange County to sign up for Twitter seven years ago (a distinction confirmed by the rankings website Twitaholic). He tweets throughout each day, blogs, produces a weekly podcast and talks by phone, Skype and Google Chat with a nationwide roster of church leaders. Callers make appointments via an interactive scheduler on Chuang's

website.

Last year, Chuang traveled 35,839 miles in 74 days on 16 trips to conferences and meetings. This information comes from the Chuang family Christmas card, which also details the number of followers (7,000) Chuang has on Twitter and the number of reward points he earned last year at Starbucks (50).

Since 2005, Chuang has edited two books on Asian American ministry, produced a report on current trends in Asian American churches, written 23 magazine articles and made 28 presentations at church conferences and seminars – achievements tabulated, in chronological order, on Chuang's website.

Chuang has bipolar disorder. He has been successfully treated for the condition since 2001. But he attributes his numerous career changes and intellectual restlessness, in part, to manic episodes.

His periods of depression, he said, brought him near suicide. And they convinced him that helping Asian American churches become more culturally inclusive is tantamount to a life-or-death calling.

“It's very hard for Asians to talk about their weaknesses,” Chuang said, explaining why he waited years before publicly acknowledging his condition and seeking treatment.

Chuang said traditional Asian American churches are especially inhospitable to painful personal problems because many Asian cultures prize a veneer of stoic hard work and moral respectability.

“I want to bring churches into a place to deal more honestly with the real person,” Chuang said.

“I would like to see Asian Americans become more healthy and whole as people.”

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Dave Gibbons, pastor of Irvine's Newsong church, said Orange County's rapidly changing demographics force Asian American churches to become early adopters of the inclusivity Chuang seeks.

“Orange County is a beautiful laboratory,” Gibbons said. “You have multiple cultures come together, and there's this clashing and creativity.”

Even successful first-generation churches are adapting. Until five years ago, Steve Choi was leading a small English-language service at SaRang Community Church in Anaheim, the largest Korean church outside of Korea, with 10,000 mostly Korean-speaking members.

With church leaders' blessing, Choi left SaRang and started a new church, CrossWay, dedicated to reaching a younger, multiethnic audience. Some 1,000 worshippers now gather for three Sunday services at two locations, in Brea and Irvine. A quarter of the congregation is non-Korean.

CrossWay members travel to Haiti to volunteer at an orphanage, support a seminary in India and organize a basketball camp for low-income youth in Mississippi.

“When we go there (to Mississippi), people have never seen such a thing,” Choi said, adding: “To be honest, the kids there are better than the guys” who lead the camp.

Chuang said he now sees signs of Asian American church innovation outside California – in Seattle, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.

Ultimately, he said, only “two things are required” for Asian American churches to innovate.

“One is people. The second is a leader or pastor. If there are pockets of Asian Americans, and a pastor or leader willing to lead a church, it can happen.”

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