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Churches Reach Out As County Diversifies

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New Congregations Entice Immigrants

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Three years ago, José Mercado was a businessman attending Grace Community Church in Virginia, where he led a small Bible study group. He loved his church, but praying there did not always come naturally.

"The hardest thing for me to do in English is pray; it's extremely hard," Mercado said. "It's something that comes so deep from [within] you that your language just wants to be part of the flow of it."

So when church leaders approached him about a possible pastoral calling, the Puerto Rican-born Mercado said he would like to lead a church of Spanish-speakers.

Grace Community Church and Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, a congregation with more than 3,000 members on Muddy Branch Road, sponsored Mercado through pastoral college. Last month, the congregation helped him found Iglesia Gracia Soberana, a "church planting" three years in the making.

As [Montgomery County](#)'s population changes, Christian churches are adding facilities and reaching out to the international community and immigrants in various ways, church leaders and observers said. According to 2006 [U.S. Census Bureau](#) estimates, the county's population is about 14 percent Hispanic and 13 percent Asian. An abundance of new faces from West Africa, South America, Asia and other parts of the world signifies for some a chance to spread the Gospel.

"We're seeking to do what we can to serve the community that we're a part of," said Kenneth Maresco of Gaithersburg, executive pastor of Covenant Life, citing Gaithersburg's large Hispanic population. "That's part of our calling, and the Old Testament is very clear about 'serving the international in your midst.' "

Iglesia Gracia Soberana is the second Spanish-speaking church in the United States founded by Sovereign Grace Ministries, an international missionary effort for evangelical, Reformed and continuationist Christian churches. The new Gaithersburg church started with about 40 Covenant Life members and some old friends, Mercado said. About 100 people attended the second meeting.

Cultural needs played a big part in founding Disciples Fellowship International, a Southern Baptist church that meets Sundays at Forest Oak Middle School in Gaithersburg and is raising money for its own facility, the Rev. Paul Mulani said. The Kenyan-born pastor founded the church four years ago after he saw studies showing a "number of people who needed to be reached."

"We use English. The language is not an issue at all, but the context is an issue," Mulani said. "For many Africans . . . there is a cultural aspect that does not get fulfilled in a Western-style church."

Christian Africans uncomfortable with the in-and-out one-hour worship schedule in some Western churches welcome having a church where services are more "dynamic," Mulani said, referring to 11 a.m. ceremonies that can last into the afternoon.

"They've been brought up with a communal type of aspect, a sense of belonging," he said. "Time is not an issue for many of them. They want somewhere to be socially fulfilled, too."

New Covenant Fellowship Church, a nondenominational evangelical Christian church on Waring Station Road in Germantown, was founded in fall 1990 to reach out to immigrant Koreans and the community at large. Nearly 20 years later, the church still holds services in Korean and English.

"Just like any other immigrants in the past, there's a language gap between the first generation, second generation, third generation and so forth," said Senior Pastor Jamie Kim. "But by providing different services in different languages, they can still come and share the common background that transcends language."

For many immigrants, the church becomes "almost like a community center," Kim said. "We not only keep our identity as Korean Americans, we can foster the sense of community where they can belong and kind of share common history, culture, background, tradition."

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