

# Church aids migrants from India

## Christian house of worship in Gilbert eases shift for newcomers

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Eighteen-year-old Mervyn Abraham's introduction to the International Assembly of God rings true for many of the church's members.

The church is one of the few Christian churches in the Valley that caters predominantly to Asian Indians. Abraham's family moved to Phoenix from the United Arab Emirates without knowing anyone and found a home in the congregation.

That's what brings many immigrants to the Rev. Roy Cheriyan's church. Prayers are spoken in Malayalam, an Indian dialect, and women wear traditional Indian dress.

The congregation, which shares a building with Sunrise Assembly of God in Gilbert, offers immigrants an opportunity to continue to embrace their culture while they acclimate to life in the Valley.

Cheriyan founded the church 10 years ago, and the congregation has grown from two families to about 120 members.

Most have recently moved from India and know little about American life. Before some leave their homeland, they connect with Cheriyan, who will often pick them up at the airport and help them find an apartment.

The church has several outreach groups around the Valley to increase its fellowship.

In 2006, Phoenix was home to more than 9,000 Asian Indians, according to the Census Bureau.

Abraham's family moved to Phoenix two years ago and drove 30 miles every Saturday and Sunday to attend services in Gilbert.

One of the main reasons they decided to move to Chandler was to be closer to the church.

People have come from as far as Tucson to attend Cheriyan's church, Cheriyan said.

The room is lined with chairs, but they aren't used much during the service. On a recent Sunday, members raised their voices and lifted their arms or rhythmically clapped to song. Men danced to the altar and worshippers were blessed by Cheriyan and a visiting Indian pastor. Members took turns praying loudly to God, while others bowed and softly prayed along with their eyes closed.

Knowing the Bible is emphasized, and children stand at the front of the church reciting the verse they memorized for the week.

"We always keep the taste of India," Cheriyan said. "The way we worship is totally different from Western style."

There was no conventional sermon. Instead, the visiting pastor spoke in an Indian dialect while Cheriyan translated his words.

"We stand here victorious in the name of God," Cheriyan said. His words were met with an outpouring of praise.

There were few still moments during the 2 ½- hour service.

"It's just awesome to see everybody in the spirit and pumped up for God," Abraham said.

The congregation is home for Anisha Rajan, 18, whose family was driven by Cheriyan from Phoenix to Gilbert for church when they moved to the Valley four years ago. There's also Dennis Samukutty, the church's youth leader, who met Cheriyan when he picked him up from the airport.

"I usually just let myself go and let God lead me through worship," Samukutty said.

## **Finding a balance**

In India, the members of Cheriyan's church were in the minority. Only about 2 percent of the country's population is Christian, according to the CIA's World Factbook.

Cheriyan bridges cultures with the service. They begin in Malayalam, but end in English.

Abraham attends high school with several youth-group members and says it helps having his church friends at school. Abraham says they all struggle with how free teenagers are in the Valley to make their own decisions. Back in India there was a rigid social code.

Sonrise's Pastor Rick Oller said sharing the building with the church has been a lesson in diversity and commitment to God for his congregation.

"The church is a place where unity can be met," Oller said. "It teaches our people that many of them have experienced severe persecution for their faith."

At the end of service, the congregation gathers at the front of the church to praise God. Abraham leads them in English songs with verses promising, "We will worship you with all of our strength" and "We totally trust in you, Jesus."

If you closed your eyes, you could be in any of several Sunday service across the Valley.

"When you have complete realization of who God is and realize there are no limitations to your feelings," Abraham said. "An Indian community worshipping in English is pretty awesome.

"When you lead worship, you really feel God's presence on stage."

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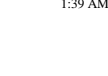
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