

ELCA Global Missionaries in Japan

THE WILSON FAMILY



The feral parakeets of Tokyo

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Pastors are always expected to “grow” their congregations, and naturally that was my plan when I arrived at Tokyo Lutheran Church in August 2018. But I immediately came across a strange paradox: in a city of 9 million people (38 million if you count the whole metro area), famous for its advertising and noise, how do you reach even one person?

So far, our website is our best asset. We’ve had regular members join after they found us online, and many tourists stop in during their trips. That’s great! But the people who come are almost always Christians already, or interested in Christianity. Part of our calling as the

church is to reach people who are not Christian and share the good news about Jesus Christ with them.

But again, I wondered: how to do it?

From conversations with other pastors, I've learned that a very good way to reach out to people who are uncertain or ignorant about the Christian message is with a Service of Prayer for Healing. This is something we can offer to everyone—not just the baptized. (The people Jesus healed were certainly not baptized!) We could have the service in the evenings, I thought, so Tokyoites wouldn't have to get out of bed the one day a week they have off. And honestly, everyone needs healing. We are all hurt in some way.

I talked to the senior pastor and a couple of church members about the idea, and they were supportive. I even scheduled a time for the first service.

But as time got closer, I began to feel that something wasn't quite right. I didn't know what it was. Just that it wasn't right, and I had to figure out what it was before proceeding with the healing service.

While that was happening, I also had to be away several Sundays last fall (which I talked about in my November 2019 newsletter). Three of them were for my ongoing work with the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg and the other was for vacation. All four Sundays fell within the course of three months, and I felt bad that I had to be away from the congregation for so much time.

However, it turned out that the Lord used these trips to show me the way forward.

My first trip was to Madagascar, for the International Lutheran-Pentecostal dialogue. The Malagasy Lutherans have a very lively lay ministry that focuses on prayer for healing and deliverance from evil. We heard several presentations from the Lutheran pastors there



about this ministry. It was during these presentations that I began to have the thought: prayer is at the center of what they do! They don't heal until they have learned how to pray. So maybe that was what was missing from my idea. I wasn't sure, though.



Then I went on my next trip to Sweden. Sweden and Japan are famous for being the two least-religious countries in the whole world. Traditionally Sweden has been a “Lutheran country,” but I had heard that today the church there is very weak. However, at the Johannelund School of Theology in Uppsala I found myself in the midst of one of the most vibrant church movements I have ever encountered. It is certainly not the majority of the Church of Sweden, but the community centered around the theological seminary in Uppsala is so full of faith

and has such a strong Christian witness that I was completely amazed.

And guess what I found? Yes—prayer is at the heart of their ministry.

I talked to a number of professors and pastors in Sweden, and they confirmed my intuition: you can't give what you don't have. You can't effectively reach out to people with the gospel unless the gospel is living in your heart. We definitely need worship, we definitely need the sacraments, we definitely need time together for fellowship—but we also definitely need

prayer. Prayer is what brings everything else together, helps us learn how to move forward as a church, and shows us how do to the things that the Lord God wants us to do.

Finally, during my November trip, I had a seminar in Germany with pastors from around the world, and I got to catch up with a dear friend in France who is a powerful Christian witness. Without my planning it or even bringing up the topic, guess where our conversation turned? Yes! Toward prayer!

At this point, I actually turned my face toward heaven and said, "OK, Lord! I hear you! We need to learn how to pray!"

So, it seems, God sent me away from Tokyo for a little while so I could hear His message for me and for our congregation. We need to learn how to pray together.



What confirmed for me that this really was God's idea and not mine is that I never would have chosen prayer as the way forward. I love to preach and teach, I like chatting with people before and after the service, and the weekly act of consecrating and distributing communion always fills me with joy. But I am, frankly, lousy at prayer.

I have always prayed in church, of course. I have been striving to become more faithful in my private prayers (but man, is it ever an uphill battle). Prayer in a group has not been a big part of my life, but I can't now unsee what I have seen: how much fruit of the Spirit grows out of prayer. We aren't required to be perfect or experienced—we are only asked to be faithful, to listen to God and one another, and to receive the gifts God wants to give us through prayer. And in His time, not ours.

I came back to my people at Tokyo Lutheran and told them what I'd learned, and they embraced it. We are absolute beginners, but already it's been wonderful. We've started with meeting once a month for about 45 minutes before the worship service, as work schedules and commuting distances in Tokyo make it impractical to choose another time. We sing the litany together, listen to a couple of psalms, and then spend some time in silence. When we're ready, we share our prayer concerns with one another and conclude by lifting them up to God.

My hope in time is that more members of the congregation will find their own prayer voices. It's a great gift to learn how to pray out loud—at meals, for sick people, or for your friends having a hard time.

But the main thing is for us to be open to where God is leading us. Maybe there are people in our congregation with great gifts for prayer that they don't even know about. We can help them develop their gifts! Maybe some people will feel called to offer prayers in our worship service. Maybe we will discover new ways to make our witness to the many non-Christians in our city.

And maybe we will find ourselves ready to offer a Service of Prayer for Healing after all.

—*Sarah Hinlicky Wilson*

Thanks for your Prayers & Support!

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You can follow Sarah's theology podcast "Queen of the Sciences" or subscribe to her "Theology & a Recipe" newsletter at www.sarahhinlickywilson.com.