

ELCA Global Missionaries in Japan

# THE WILSON FAMILY



## July/七月 2020

The globe has exploded with apocalyptic interest since I (Andrew) last wrote in January. The novel coronavirus aspirated around us, shut us all down and inside, and still threatens our health, sanity, scientific institutions, not to mention our political structures. The economy teeters on the brink, or so we fear. And churches, defined by our weekly gatherings around God's word and his real presence in the

sacraments, has been "dematerialized" (which is how the French put it). A flesh-denying separation has been thrust upon God's beloved community, and we the faithful are left swirling to cope with and comprehend its significance.

### Language Games

In all this, Sarah and I have sought to remain faithful to our vocation as co-workers of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church. To this end we are still (and, it seems from time to time, shall be forever) students of the Japanese language. I've upped my kanji game, and am still plowing through the grammar. (Well, I've already plowed through much of it already, but it seems to stick like teflon.)

In our forced quarantine, I've had to adapt my language-learning regime. I usually meet with students a few times per week, but starting in March this moved online. Facing a dearth of speaking opportunities, I asked a local pastor if he knew some members who would be willing simply to converse with me. And so for nearly three months now, in addition to my students, I've been talking several hours a week to Umeda-san and Arisawa-san, members of Ichigaya Lutheran Church.

Both have spent extensive time with international companies, and even time abroad, so they're able to help me when I need a quick translation. This has been invaluable, and my spoken capacity in Japanese has doubled or tripled since March. I've been able to integrate patterns and expressions that I've been learning for two years already. Umeda-san and Arisawa-san have been a Godsend. (BTW, if you're interested in knowing a bit more about my language-learning process, take a look at the work of [Luca Lampariello](#) and [Olly Richards](#), true inspirations and amazing polyglots.)

### Long Distance Hikers' Day

In February, I gave my first extra-ecclesiastical presentation at the annual "[Long Distance Hikers' Day](#)" meeting, hosted by my friends at [Hiker's Depot](#). I've been a passionate hiker since my childhood, and after graduating from college I hiked long sections of the [Pacific Crest Trail](#). I dropped by the shop not long after arriving in Japan and have developed good friendships with one staff person in particular. The Japanese hiking geeks (*otaku*) were thrilled to learn what the PCT was like twenty years ago and invited me to participate — which I amazed myself by

doing spontaneously in Japanese. Rough, but comprehensible.



*That's me on the lower right*

Japan has fantastic outdoor recreation infrastructure and a history of [marathon-hiking](#), but there's still nothing like America's continuous long-distance trails. And so a devoted subculture has developed around those who dream of heading to the USA to hike the [Appalachian](#) or other US trails. My newfound friends are particularly fascinated by the "[trail angels](#)" who care for hikers along the way with gifts of food, transport, or lodging. For the Japanese, it is much, much more than an outdoor

experience. It is a life-changing initiation, a sort of secular baptism.

### Is this the End?

After 15 weeks of coronavirus closure, in mid-June Tokyo Lutheran Church finally reopened. Services are limited to 30 minutes, hymns are hummed softly behind masks, communion is still off, and the usual coffee hour has been replaced by furtive greetings on the sidewalk outside. The church is thoroughly disinfected before the next service begins. Other congregations less centrally located — ours is very near Shinjuku, one of the busiest, most crowded places on the planet — are less rigorous, but similar restrictions reign throughout the city, and the world, it seems.



*A friend of the congregation made us these Pentecost-season-colored face masks*

In Japan, the churches fear greatly that Christian worship will be identified with a “superspreading cluster,” and hence heap suspicion and guilt upon an already

marginal religion. Because neither traditional Buddhism nor Shinto have regular assemblies as part of observance, churches have been singled out as risky.

Singing does seem to be a contributing factor in the current epidemic. The first [outbreak in Seattle was linked to choir practice](#); an [international praise-fest in Mulhouse](#) anchored the infection in France. That most of Japan’s confirmed cases seemed linked to nightclubs and karaoke bars, however, does not seem to lighten the suspicion against religious gatherings.

I’ve heard it many times, but I still have a hard time appreciating existentially the real suspicion held in Japan against too-fervent religion. Much as the 9/11 attacks connect Islam to terrorism in the minds of many Americans, the [sarin gas attack](#) by the Aum Shinrikyo cult in 1995 still lingers in people’s minds. This seems to contradict the relative regard held for Christianity and its influence, but so it is, I am assured. I suppose it doesn’t help that Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and similar Christian-esque sects equal Protestant Christianity in numbers. And many Japanese, understandably, find it hard to distinguish between these novel sects and Christian orthodoxy.

## Graduation

The Japanese school year came to a close despite everything, and my only student so far, Maho Morishita, graduated. She's headed to Fukuoka for her first posting. Please pray for her successful ministry!



## Race Matters

America's recent explosion (and unfortunate spillover violence) over the death of George Floyd has not left Japan utterly untouched. A thousand+ member strong [Black Lives Matter march was held in Tokyo](#). The leadership was made up of American expats, but plenty of locals showed up too, to protest systemic racial prejudice here in Japan.

Having lived outside the USA for much of my adult life, I must admit that I find America's furor over race to be both healthy and puzzling. France has, arguably, a much greater discrepancy of outcome and opportunity among its many millions of Muslim immigrants. Because France is so bureaucratically centralized, however, and because of the history of European ethnic nationalism, this reality is nearly impossible to reckon with. It is forbidden even to collect racial or religious statistics; all is swept under the rug of "égalité." Added to this is the explicit goal of French education — to make *French* citizens. And so the public [housing projects in the banlieu](#) seethe with justified resentment. Unemployment among these youth tops 50%.

Japan is 98% Japanese — or at least its citizenry. Foreign residents (like us) are some 3 million. The most numerous immigrant groups — Koreans and Chinese — blend in with some ease in the working world — and are even sought after for their expertise. A recent article in [Foreign Policy](#) highlights the trend. Other nationalities — Filipinos, Indonesians, Nepalis, Bangladeshis, Vietnamese — are heavily represented in service industries and elder care. The Japanese population is aging, and its birthrate is among the

lowest in the world. So immigrants are absolutely necessary to prevent a catastrophic collapse of the economy, to say nothing about caring for the aging. Even industry has to recruit labor from abroad to keep its factories running.

While it's working so far practically, this situation sits uneasily with many Japanese. [Despite practices to the contrary](#), the current [prime minister Abe rests upon a largely nativist platform](#). Non-native Japanese were [systematically discriminated against before the war](#); and though the American-influenced constitution of Japan asserts equality under the law, there are no means for prosecuting discriminatory behavior, which is widespread. Top positions are never granted to non-Japanese, many apartments [won't lease to foreigners](#), and many [restaurants, bars and clubs](#), for example, [openly display "Japanese Only" on the doors](#).

To Americans, with our history of slavery and segregation, this is jarring indeed. Given Japan's insularity and historic homogeneity, however, it seems unfair impatiently to hold up our own transplanted standards. Schools, policing, and bureaucracy can be pain points for outsiders anywhere, and Japan is no exception. Bullying is certainly a problem,

though, to be honest, it is a problem present at all levels, and for many, many Japanese people, too. I don't really know what is reasonable to expect. Given the numbers and current developments, the main real risk seems less policy in general than the political scapegoating of the other — something Americans are guilty of as well.

Without diminishing the horrors and injustices recently displayed in Minneapolis and elsewhere, it's important that we not forget how far we've come. Because of the insistent cries of honest protestors, America is actually dealing with its racial matters. It is no longer 1968. Police violence, and violent crime in general, have plummeted since the 1990s. That's not to say we can't improve. The militarization of the police seems particularly retrograde. But, despite the protests, as seen from abroad, America is still a beacon of hope for multicultural society. We should not sacrifice our recent and imperfect success for a pyrrhic victory of perfection.

### **Church and the Nations**

All this cultural code runs within us, and yet it is at such a distance from our day-to-day lives as missionaries. We are sent to the nations. Baptized into Christ's body, we no longer bow before the local

gods — whatever their present manifestation. In the meantime we may be subject to the various jurisdictions of this planet. But In the end, we are subjects of Christ alone.

—Andrew L. Wilson

You can also follow Sarah’s theology podcast “Queen of the Sciences” and subscribe to her “Theology & a Recipe” newsletter on her website, [www.sarahhinlickywilson.com](http://www.sarahhinlickywilson.com).



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