

ELCA Global Missionaries in Japan

THE WILSON FAMILY



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This newsletter goes out a few days before the U.S. election, and I'm sure, if you're there in the midst of it, it's all you can think of—and probably doesn't inspire very cheery feelings, no matter what side you're on. So, if you need a break from the doom, you'll find some good news here!

Against all odds, our congregation at Tokyo Lutheran Church is doing well. Not financially, I should qualify; giving is down for us, as it no doubt is for you. Japan is pretty far behind the U.S. in making

online giving easy and normal, so the large numbers of people still staying away from church are no longer bringing their cash offerings in envelopes.



Despite that, attendance in our English service has been resilient—in fact, even better than before the pandemic started. That's extra amazing, considering that 1) some of our regulars are still staying away for health reasons, and 2) we aren't getting any tourists, who used to form part of our congregation nearly every Sunday. Maybe it's that in-person time is now valuable in a way that it never was before; maybe it's that, as always, in times of crisis people are open to hearing the gospel in a new way.

The further result is that we have just received five new members at TLC! Ok, so one of them is Andrew, and he technically is a dual member with our U.S. congregation... but it seemed important to emphasize to the people at TLC that we live here, worship here every Sunday, and are part of their church, not just extremely persistent visitors.

The other four are all very different. One is another American who's been here about 7 years and always a regular church attender, but not till now a member. Another is an Indonesian who just graduated from a theology BA program and aspires to become a pastor in the Japan Evangelical

Lutheran Church, so we've been helping him get in touch with the right people and take the next steps in that direction. The third is a Tanzanian who grew up in the enormous Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania and has lived on and off in Japan her whole adult life; she said joining our church felt like coming home. The fourth and final is also an American, who hasn't been regular at church for more than twenty-five years, but in his hour of need the Lord heard his prayer, and in gratitude he has come back to congregational life.

Given the assortment of stories and backgrounds of these new members—but also given the difficulties of gathering even at the best of times in this megalopolis—I turned, like pretty much everyone else on the planet, to YouTube and Zoom! I recorded very short videos on all six parts of Luther's Small Catechism, one video for each subsection, and assembled them into a playlist. For each of the six weeks, I asked the participants to view the videos on their own time. One of the additional reasons for doing this in our setting is that not everyone is a native English speaker (and I'm a fast talker!) so they could set the speed to their own comfort level. Then I asked them to send me by email one question on the Catechism and one question on anything at all related to the Christian faith. We met for half an hour on Monday nights to talk through the questions and anything else that came up, and to pray together. The questions were amazing! And it turned out to be a really good way to manage the challenges of Christian education in our pandemic era. I'll definitely use this strategy again, whatever the conditions. (If you want to have a look at the videos, click here: tinyurl.com/y6c2j9f9) An added bonus was that our Tanzanian new member had a little boy in need of baptism! So her membership preparation was also preparation to take her vows as a mother bringing her child to the font.

Finally, we had one other big matter on the horizon: our son Zeke's confirmation! Poor kid, he's now the third generation to receive confirmation instruction from a parent-pastor, and in his case there weren't even other students to absorb some of the attention. For all that, he was a good sport, and we had some really great conversations. He also committed the Small Catechism to memory and wrote an essay to share with the congregation.



We celebrated all these good things in a mega-ceremony on Reformation Sunday! (It took some creative discernment to weave all the aspects together so as to avoid three separate recitations of the Creed...) We had a big crowd for the day, including good friends who stood in for all of our far-away family members, and some members of the Japanese congregation came too to show their support. (You can listen to my sermon: tinyurl.com/yxr7oa3y)

The most memorable aspect of the day turned out to be the baptism... because the little one was not at all prepared to have cool water splashed on his head! He screamed for a good long while after, despite his mother's best attempts to calm him. I pulled out the line I always heard growing up: "Well, we sure drowned the old Adam out of that one!" I have to say, I always kind of appreciate the squawks and screams of protest at baptism. It is, after all, dying with Christ and dying to sin! If adult candidates for baptism understood that, they'd probably scream even louder. I'm always in awe of how the Lord of heaven and earth snatches sinners from the clutches of death and the devil with the most peaceable of all deaths, as we receive in holy baptism.

We are also finally back to celebrating holy communion, so we had one of those special double-sacrament Sundays. Despite the mask and stagey disinfecting of the pastor's hands before the communion liturgy, it's such a relief to be together again, in person, side by side (even with 2m between us), receiving the Lord's body and blood.

Afterwards we gathered in the fellowship hall for a party (no food or drink allowed, unfortunately) to welcome the new folks, distribute flowers and Small Catechisms, and deluge Zeke with all the gifts and messages from his relatives abroad. Afterwards our family and friends went out for a nice lunch

to celebrate the big day. I told Zeke that he'd always remember his confirmation prayer and laying-on of hands being accompanied by the wails of a baby... but that, in my experience, whenever we are danger of thinking that the future or the faith depends on our perfect execution of the formalities, God blesses us with something positively preposterous, just to remind us that it doesn't depend on our performance but on His presence. Thanks be to God for that! And let's take that confidence into whatever the last months of this year bring us.



—Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

Stay in touch with us at sarah.wilson@elca.org and andrew.wilson@elca.org. To donate, visit <https://community.elca.org/MissionaryGiving> (we're the last on the list—hurray for the W in Wilson!). Checks are payable through your church to "ELCA Global Church Sponsorship" with "Wilson GCS2052" in the memo line.

You can follow Sarah's theology podcast "[Queen of the Sciences](#)" and subscribe to her "Theology & a Recipe" e-newsletter at www.sarahhinlickywilson.com.