

ELCA Global Missionaries in Japan

THE WILSON FAMILY

October/十月 2023

Finally, it's cooled off! After a typically hot July and August, and an *atypically* hot September (evidently the second-hottest on record), within about two weeks the Tokyo region has abruptly decided it's time for autumn. It's not even that cold, but after three straight months in the 90s, the 60s feel chilly. Not complaining, though.



Despite the fame of the spring's cherry blossoms, autumn is my favorite time of year here. In fact, Japan is the only place in the world where I've ever *liked* November and looked forward to it.

Ironically, I'll be spending most of November out of Japan! For the first time since 2019, I'll be able to return to Germany to teach my annual course on Luther's theology in Wittenberg. My colleague from the Strasbourg Institute, Theodor Dieter, first proposed the two-week course for Lutheran pastors from around the world, and we taught the



inaugural session in November 2009.

We've continued to do so together every year since, though only online in 2020, 2021, and 2022. There is also a March course offered now, taught by a rotating panel of faculty. [You can learn more about it here.](#)

I for one am thrilled to be going back to Luther's city after all this time, and not only for the cake, souvenirs, and sausage! (Though as you can see from the picture, you can eat "German dogs" in Tokyo, too.) Through this course I've met an amazing swath of Lutheran pastors, from a

Senegalese bishop who is a convert from Islam (in his words, "The Koran is a book about how you save yourself; the Bible is a book about how God saves you"); a third-generation pastor from Myanmar; and a Greenlandic pastor who told me she has to order the whole year's communion wine at one go before the ice sets in!

It's also always amazing to experience the range of reactions to first-hand close reading of Luther, since most of our participants know little beyond the Small Catechism. Americans have tended to be the best read in Luther, I think because we have Lutheran seminaries and the wealth to have a lot of books but also are enough



of a minority to think it worthwhile to study our reformer carefully.

Scandinavians generally believe that they



know Luther well, but in actual fact most of them don't; most have never read him at all. More than one Dane or Swede has had

something approaching a crisis at the gap between what they perceived to be a "Lutheran church" and what Luther actually says; and most end up having something akin to a conversion experience when the real message finally gets through.

Without fail, it's the Africans and Asian who greet Luther with the most enthusiasm. With few exceptions, they're educated at pan-Protestant seminaries, so their direct knowledge of Luther is the Small Catechism, plus whatever the liturgy and tradition has passed on through the generations. Reading Luther directly, they light up and say: "This is it! This explains everything, from the Bible to our own lived experience!" I never would have guessed that going into this project almost 15 years ago, but year after year the pattern holds. None of this is to denigrate the immensely formative role of the Small Catechism. I continue to be astonished at how fruitful it is for Christian education. We've had another influx of new people at Tokyo Lutheran Church in the past few months, so I'm now teaching *two* Catechism classes concurrently. One is for two young men,

both from China, considering baptism. The other is for six already-baptized people from Europe, North America, and Africa, wishing to deepen their faith and understanding.

Our congregation is great at welcoming people who come in through the doors. But we're still wrestling with how to take the message *outside* our doors.

One way we've come up with to reach outward is our audio outreach project, called "[Live! from the Bible](#)," which I've shared about in previous newsletters.

We're just beginning work on Season 3,



"the ancestors of Jesus"—in other words, figures from the Old Testament. We hope that the language of "ancestors" connects to Japanese culture and gives a point of entry for stories not directly about Jesus' own lifetime.

But just this week we managed to get outside our doors—literally. Every October there is a neighborhood festival, *omatsuri*. Tokyo Lutheran Church is the hub of the festival, opening its rooms for community and charitable organizations to set up (and also sell some great food!). Our English congregation prepared flyers and origami to hand out to the thousands of passersby. We're only about two meters outside the church door, but it makes a difference.

Thanks for your Prayers & Support!

Stay in touch with us at

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