

ELCA Global Missionaries in Japan

# THE WILSON FAMILY

January/一月 2025

---

My goodness, has it ever been a long time since we last sent out a newsletter! Apologies for that, but on the plus side, we saw you in person since the last time we wrote! And that was a great and encouraging blessing. We thank you for your ongoing curiosity, commitment, donations, and prayers toward mission work in Japan. We thank you for not being weirded out by the very existence of missionaries!



*Your Missionaries, talking to the Origami king!*

And we thank you for engaging in Christian mission in America, in your own neighborhoods. If there's anything I've learned in the course of my ministry, it's that mission work *always* begins at home.

Not just the streets and blocks surrounding the church, but in the congregation itself. Jesus continually calls us back from the brink, because we continually wander to the edge of it and peer over! Thanks be to God for grabbing us by the collar and yanking us back.

That said, we have some monumentally significant news to share. Which is... we are drawing our missionary service in Japan to a close.



*At the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia!*

This decision has been a long time coming, and not lightly made. But the big thing to tip us over the line was the sad but inevitable news of the imminent closure of Japan Lutheran College, where Andrew has been teaching. Always a small school, JLC initially found a unique and attractive mission in offering degrees in clinical psychology and social work long before those became mainstream, or even

respectable, in wider Japanese society. Along with other Christian schools and mission organizations, Japan came to terms with the need for these helping professions. Yet with that came the classic “victim of your own success” syndrome: practically every college teaches these topics now. It has been hard to attract students to this small college for these two fields, and while some non-Christians have also been interested in the third area of study, Christianity, it hasn’t been enough to override the general cultural distance from explicit Christian faith formation.



*Campus Christmas visit from “teen idol” Santa and her reindeer*

Even so, JLC might have carried on. But the real reason for the closure is surprising and rather tragic: namely, Japan’s demographic implosion. There are only

about half as many 18-year-old Japanese alive today as there were two decades ago. The birth rate continues to drop. It’s simply not possible, numerically, to supply enough students to keep all the colleges in business. JLC is not the only one to shutter.

So it was that in spring 2024 the board made the painful decision to announce that it was admitting its final freshman class. They have promised to see these and the upperclassmen through to graduation, though with more students transferring out, and various faculty and staff either retiring or seeking positions elsewhere, even that seems unlikely. And maintaining a campus with both administration and upkeep on such a tiny income is yet another challenge.



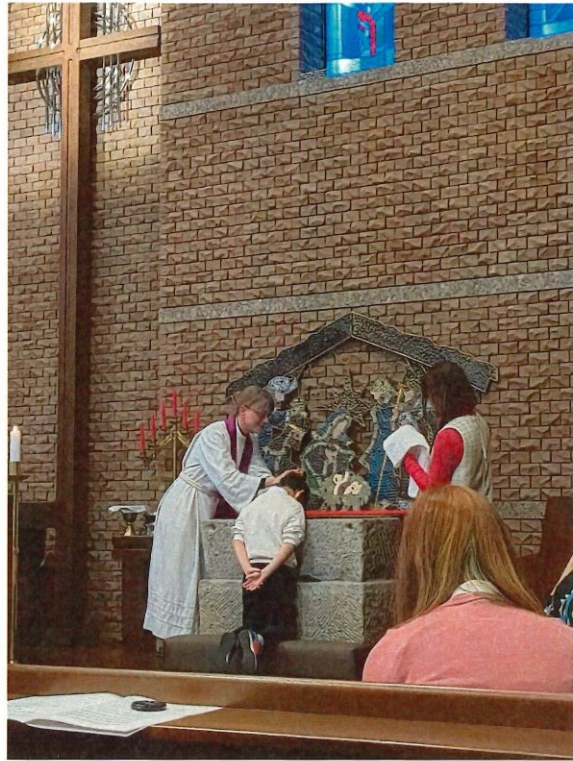
*The same teen idol Santa playing Christmas hymns on our historically re-created Baroque organ*

Japan Lutheran Theological Seminary will continue in any case. It has always been small, and its accreditation doesn't depend on the same factors as the college's. But it has certainly presumed the college's facility and faculty to keep it going. Where it will land next, and who will teach for it, is a live conversation. Please pray for those who make these hard decisions, and for strong hope to keep going in a period of tremendous loss.

What all this means for us is that there would for all intents and purposes be no work for Andrew in a few short years; indeed, his class sizes have already dropped dramatically just in this academic year. Staying here long-term is just not a professional option.

All this sounds very grim, and it's certainly not cheerful. But there as usual there are some good things to come out of it, not just for us but for the work here.

As Andrew leaves the college, so Sarah leaves the congregation. That, too, was a hard conversation! But the good news is that in spite of everything, the English worship group at Tokyo Lutheran Church has grown steadily. In fact, it's grown enough that it's quite a different atmosphere from when we first arrived. Then, 20 people in church was a good solid Sunday. Now, 40 people feels like a small turnout.



*Christmas baptisms at Tokyo Lutheran Church.*

In addition to that, we've had a steady stream of people joining the church and/or receiving the sacrament of baptism. We had three baptisms this year, which may not sound like much, but is a bumper crop in Japan! Sarah has spent most of her time as a half-time pastor doing Catechism study with new members and baptismal candidates. It's been a fascinating and inspiring experience, but it has meant less time for the already-Christians and already-members.

Which is why it's such great news that the ELCA mission department has decided, in cooperation with the JELC, to search for a **full-time pastor** to take Sarah's place! The congregation is definitely ready for this and will flourish under such care. (So, if

you know anybody who'd be interested...  
or if you *are* anybody who'd be interested...  
get in touch! As soon as possible!)

*Andrew and Zeke in their graduation suits*



In addition to this, for ourselves personally, we are ready to return to our homeland. Our Zeke graduated from high school in May, and in August he started as a freshman at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. He is thriving! But he is also super duper far away. We'd be glad to be just a *little* bit closer to our one and only child. Also, having lived in the U.S. only two out of the last 16 years, we are ready to be near our parents and brothers again. Maybe it's that we're not too far from the half-century mark? It's time to come home and put down some roots.

What all that will entail is yet to be determined in exact detail. We will conclude our service at the end of March. We intend to take a few months off to travel after that, as we've done between gigantic moves in the past. The hope is to settle down stateside in September or October.

*Bidding Zeke farewell at Concordia College*



Once again, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your faithful support of our work in Japan! Please keep Japan, its people, and its churches in your prayers. Please support the next missionaries who come here to serve! And if you'd like to stay in touch with us, just hop over to our respective websites and drop us a line:

- [www.sarahhinlickywilson.com](http://www.sarahhinlickywilson.com)
- [alw.ac](http://alw.ac)