

# The Bencke Family in Japan



September 2024: 105 番



Patrick and I attended the Getty “Sing!” conference in Nashville. It’s a conference dedicated to congregational hymn singing you sing a lot of hymns. One highlight was singing the Hallelujah Chorus with 6000 other singers!

## Home Assignment 2024 – a few reflections

We are closing in on the end of our 9<sup>th</sup> home assignment since being deployed as missionaries for the ELCA. Whether we visited your congregation or not, THANK YOU for your continued partnership. Despite what we hear on the news and how politics or media will present the world, there are wonderful and hopeful things happening in many corners of the earth. Thank you for sharing some of those hopeful things with us, and thank you for continuing to hear our stories of hope from the field.

We have thoroughly enjoyed visiting with our partners in mission, visiting several places for the first time. One new adventure was that we were invited to help out with a Vacation Bible School this year! We were a little nervous, and didn’t know quite what to expect, but it was a fun experience and hopefully the kiddos walked away learning a little bit about Japan and a little bit about missions. The attached picture is from Salem Lutheran Church in Dalbo, Minnesota. The VBS kids were working hard with their chopsticks to transfer Japanese snacks from one bowl to another.

In addition to visiting congregations, we made time to visit some colleges since Hannah is just now starting that process. She also got her driver’s permit, so it has been (mostly) fun to see her mature in that way. Since driver’s education doesn’t occur in Japan until age 18, this is a unique opportunity for her to stretch her “American” wings. She continues to juggle both her Japanese curriculum (she’s missing about three weeks of

school this year) and the need to simultaneously prepare for the U.S. standardized tests (ACT and SAT). This is stressful, for sure. We try to remind her that her worth is not calculated in a number, as so much of Japanese education and even U.S. education seems to imply.

Our oldest daughter, Emilie, graduated from St. Olaf this past May. Three days after packing up her room and graduating, she had her life packed into two suitcases and she moved back to Japan. I'm always impressed with how loosely she holds on to material things. It was kind of interesting to see her leave behind her clothing, make-up, and books, and choosing to take back only those things that would bring her fond nostalgia. I was never that mature at her age. She will begin her "real job" on October 1<sup>st</sup>, where she will be a part of a two-year management course for a luxury hotel chain in Japan. The Lord continues to guide her path, for which we give thanks.

Home assignment is always very difficult to explain. Contrary to what many of our colleagues in Japan believe, it is not a vacation. It is not "time off." We are on the road a lot, driving from one church to another, staying in hotels, friends' or family members' homes, or in homes of gracious hosts we have never met. By the time we return to Kumamoto, we will have covered over 20,000 miles. We do a lot of presentations and sermons, and are asked a lot of questions about our work, and about "how Japan is" or "what Japan is like." The interactions are more than just pleasant. They are uplifting, joyous, and they invigorate our hearts for the eventual return.

However, the conversations very rarely delve into the nitty gritty pores of what it's like to have feet and hearts on both sides of the ocean, or what it's like for kids to be on the move like that. We have, over the years, been extremely protective of our kids in order to provide them the most stability and choice to not be "on" for congregational visits. With only one exception, congregations are always incredibly gracious when we explain that the kids are with a family member instead of traveling with us. We don't talk about the heart break of seeing friends or family members only once a decade. We don't talk about the heavier weights that siblings bear with aging parents due to our absence and the consequential guilt. We don't talk about having to "keep up" with school and work while we are here. By no means am I complaining, and I pray my words do not carry that nuance to your eyes. But I think it's healthy to present "home assignment" as an important part of mission in a way that allows our readership to understand the more tender areas. As we receive guests or brothers and sisters into our assemblies for worship, I like to remind myself that who we see walk into the narthex is a very small, curated version of what is going on in their lives after worship.

In a few days, we'll be back in Japan. Whichever direction we are headed, whether it's east or west, or even toward heaven, **"We are, ever and always, heading home on our way from home."** (Elizabeth Trotter, *A Life Overseas*)