

The Bencke Family in Japan

Volume 20, August 2nd, 2009

Decorating a sanctuary in Japan



Japanese churches, for the most part, are very sparsely decorated. They tend to have very little in the way of ornate fixtures or colored banners. When asked about this, one woman responded that Japanese Christians have a difficult time separating themselves from the Buddhist cultural influences that surround them, and that Christian worship is the one time where they can try to put those religious/cultural influences aside momentarily.

For example, many Buddhist and Shinto temples and shrines tend to have very ornate gold plating, statues, emblems, and lots of red and gold color. The Buddhist area of worship in a home is similar with its gold statue of Buddha and other related pieces in the shrine. So, in order to make the distinction for Christian worship, many churches opt for a minimalist approach to décor. Often, colors within the church are muted earth tones, with plain wooden floors and white walls being the norm.

There is one exception. Japanese people are very keen to appreciate the beauty of nature and natural materials. In our church, therefore, there is a committee of women who prepare these stunning floral arrangements. Each Saturday one or two of these women come to the church to arrange flowers. Aside from the seasonal colored cloth that covers the altar, these flowers are the only colorful adornment in the church sanctuary.

Hey kids!

Test your international math skills!

Missionaries from the U.S. are usually thinking about two forms of currency – **the U.S. dollar** and **the currency of the country in which they serve**. How many different countries' currencies can you think of? What is the currency in your neighbors – Canada and Mexico? Here in Japan, we have the *Japanese Yen*. Currently, there are about 94 yen to every dollar. So, if the price of milk is 207 yen per liter, and there are 3.8 liters in a gallon, can you figure out how much a gallon of milk costs? Compare that to what the cost is in the U.S. More or less?

Prayer requests:

Please join with us as we pray with praise and thanksgiving...

•*May*– thanks be to God for the baptism of Hannah and Yui – may they both find support and love in a Christ-centered environment throughout their lives.

•*June* – thanks be to God for life of Chad Smith, my cousin, who passed away on June 27th of melanoma cancer. Please pray for his parents, Ruth and Jim, and his younger sister, Becky, as they grieve this tremendous loss of a brother and son. Chad was 41.

•*August* –we pray for peace as we remember the many people who died on August 6th and August 9th in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. May the Lord work mightily in the hearts of leaders and individuals throughout the world to put an end to bloodshed and injustice.

•*August* – we pray for our colleagues who are on home assignment this year – may they have safe journeys and be encouraged as they share with supporting congregations about how the hand of God is working in Japan and other places around the world.

•*August* – thanks be to God for the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church which will celebrate its 100th anniversary this coming fall.

Spiritual growth – how is it measured?

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Did we miss anyone?

If you know anyone who might like to receive our newsletters, please have them send us an e-mail requesting to be added to our mailing list.

ELCA— Global Mission

If you are interested in learning more about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's global mission, please visit:

www.elca.org/globalmission

JELC: Mission in India

If you wish to support the efforts of the Comprehensive Rural Health Project in Jamkhed, India, please send donations to Rev. Twila Schock (address above). **Please make sure to mark donations as "Level 2 funding (JELA): Helping Children in Need."** A gift of \$25 will buy materials for an artificial leg for someone who cannot afford that expense on his/her own. We are thrilled that this year some college students from Kumamoto went to Jamkhed as a part of the work camp! These students called the trip 'life changing.'

The opening song of the musical, "Rent," is called *525,600 Minutes*. This number represents the number of minutes in a year. The main theme of the song is to ask the audience, "How do you measure a life?" Is it measured in time? Efforts? Accomplishments? Or is it measured in love – both how much you give and how much you receive?

In my graduate studies, I learned how to manipulate data to make it numerical (thanks to my stats classes). However, even in making data from meaningful research into numbers, I find that in the end, the numbers don't carry a lot of meaning.

In mission work, growth can only be measured numerically to a limited extent. Instead, we have to look at hearts and lives that have been transformed, or those that have been healed by Jesus. Sometimes, this is accomplished through the work of our hands, sometimes the words of our lips, and sometimes through a quiet presence. Sometimes, we have to look at the students and adults we work with and see that their readiness to explore themselves and their spirituality more deeply has grown because of something they've studied or a new thought they've never considered before.

Just last week, in fact, as the piano tuner finished tuning the piano, he asked what I taught at Luther College. I told him "Christianity and Music." He said, "Oh, you mean 'History of Western Music?'" I said, "No, the relationship between Christian worship and the music that is used for worship. For example," I said, "We explore such questions as why don't the Japanese churches tend to use Japanese traditional instruments like koto or taiko in Christian worship?" He looked at me, stunned. He said, "I've never thought about that, but now I have a thought to think about for the rest of the day." The man isn't Christian (as far as I know), but he was very interested in the ensuing conversation which was about how many cultures have incorporated their traditional music in worship, whereas the Japanese Christian church has, for the most part, been resistant to that.

Talking about Christianity is a big step for Japanese people to take, as it usually involves making themselves very vulnerable – spiritually and emotionally.

On May 17th, our daughter Hannah was baptized. Another young lady was baptized that day. Her name is Yui. She's about 19 years old or so. It struck me as Patrick and I were standing at the front with Hannah, with Emilie watching, and as several friends came especially to be a part of the service, that Yui was standing there, alone. No family members came to support her. A few friends came – those who were already Christian. It is a situation that happens so often in the country when a young person decides to get baptized. How strong of faith she must be, and how much support she and so many like her need.

How do you measure spiritual growth for a young woman who, only a few years ago, had no idea of what Christianity could mean for her personally, and now is strong enough to stand alone in front of a congregation of over 50 people and state publicly that she "believes in Jesus Christ our Lord...who suffered, died and was buried, and on the third day He rose again..."