

# The Bencke Family in Japan

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**On December 30<sup>th</sup>** we held a worship service at the college chapel for my mother. This heartwarming service was made possible by the office staff with whom Patrick and I work. In attendance were about 100 people who represented the college community, the church communities, and the immediate neighborhood in which we live. President Kiyoshige gave the message, and in retrospect, I firmly believe that a Christian memorial service such as this was probably a much more powerful tool for explaining the hope we have in Jesus Christ and the resurrection than any other type of Christian service. In this photo, Dr. Kiyoshige is explaining why we chose to use the word "celebration" on the bulletin.

**Mochuu** is a word that means "in mourning." Part of the custom in Japan is to put this notification on the front door of the house (which we did). That way, visitors, salespeople, or anyone else who comes to the door can be respectful of the situation transpiring. In the case of salespeople, it's a deterrent. In the case of friends, it usually means that "we're not quite ready to receive visitors inside the house, but please feel free to knock and we'll greet you in the entrance." This way, we could still talk with people and accept condolences, but not feel obliged to "entertain" (i.e. serve tea, find a clean place to sit, etc.).

## *Thank you*

To the friends, family, colleagues, and congregations who have extended their prayers and support throughout the past six weeks, I would like to say thank you.

On Wednesday, Dec. 21st, my parents arrived in Kumamoto for what was to be a three week visit with our family. A day after arriving, my mother suffered a fatal aneurysm. She died on December 28<sup>th</sup>, at 2:35am, at the Kumamoto National Hospital, after five days on a respirator and fluids.

In addition to Patrick, my dad, and me, we were blessed to have my sister and family, my brother and family, as well as Mom's three brothers all "at her side" via a Skype conference call on an iPad at the moment she passed into the arms of Jesus. I had never been at the side of someone at the moment of their death. This experience was transformational. What happened after that took our family to a whole new level of understanding about the reciprocal relationship of mission and what it means to 'accompany,' a word used widely in the ELCA's definition of global mission.

A fellow missionary couple who walked with us from the time my mother was hospitalized provided us emotional, logistical, technical, and spiritual support every step of the journey. Since we knew shortly after my mom arrived at the hospital that she would not survive, this assistance was incalculable. We had pastors, priests, friends, and colleagues stopping by each of the five days to offer their help with the kids, bringing food, and offering words of comfort and support. My father was welcomed into our community with arms and eyes of many, many sympathetic friends.

## *Prayer Corner*

*We give thanks to God for His promise to be always at our side.*

*We give thanks for friends and neighbors who provide love and support to us as we continue to make our home in this neighborhood.*

*We continue to pray for doctors and nurses in Japan, that they may find their strength in God as they practice medicine.*

*We pray for wisdom and guidance for those in leadership positions within the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Association. As they seek to find ways to financially support their goals, may they not lose sight of the families within their organization that serve alongside of them, including all long and short-term missionaries in Japan.*

*We pray for strength and wisdom as we move into a period of discernment about our call.*

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**Missionary Sponsorship**

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

[www.elca.org/globalmission](http://www.elca.org/globalmission)

**JELA:**

**Partnering for sustainable change**

The Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church and Japan Evangelical Lutheran Association work together to create opportunities for young Japanese Christians and those who are 'seeking' to participate in a life changing outreach program in Jamkhed, India. If you wish to support these efforts, 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. This new leg will allow an individual to return to work in his/her fields, go back to a job, take care of a family, or go to school. The loss of a leg in India is usually due to car accidents, leprosy, or in some areas, land mines.

Experiencing death of a loved one in Japan involves more hands-on activity than it does in the United States. Since my mother had indicated that she wished to be cremated upon death, we were easily able to honor that wish, since cremation is the way that Japanese handle all deaths. However, instead of saying good-bye to Mom's body at the hospital, there were many more steps in between her passing and the cremation, and then between the cremation and the memorial and ensuing funeral in the United States.

For example, before leaving the hospital, we were able to hold a short service for her in what is called the "departure room" of the hospital. It's a quiet room with low lighting, simple décor and fresh flowers. While Mom's attending neurosurgeon and the nurses who prepared her body stood by, five of us prayed at her side, sang, and said goodbye. It was perhaps the most powerful of all the services we held in Mom's honor. So fresh was the grief, her cheeks still warm...

Another piece of saying goodbye was pushing the button to begin cremation, and then transferring her bones after cremation into the urn. This is something very, very intimate and was done with deep respect and tenderness. It was another step in the process. Pushing the button was, for me, was the saddest moment of my life. Transferring her bones, was perhaps one of the most blessed.

Throughout all this, friends and neighbors stepped forth to help with the kids, prepare food, cry with us, and share their hearts. Even now, witnessing to the hope of resurrection happens every day as we encounter people who we haven't seen since leaving for the States. It is comforting for us to be able to say with confidence that my mother is at the feet of our Lord, worshipping together with the saints and angels, and that she has received her reward in heaven.

"No wearing all black." This is what I told our friend when he asked what he should expect at the Christian memorial. "EH??!" He seemed to be unable to speak. In Japanese custom, for both men and women, an all-black suit with a white shirt is the norm for such occasions. I assured him that wearing different colors, even white, was good – it helped us remember the joy of the life she lived and the resurrection of her spirit. So, we disrupted a little bit of custom there when I wore a white jacket and Patrick wore a colorful tie.

Again, we would like to re-iterate our gratitude to each of you. We have much to be thankful for, and most of it revolves around the people in our lives, both here and in the United States. To close, I will share a couple of pictures. Sarah Loan, former missionary in Kumamoto, and Pastor Yuki Goto, who baptized both our children in Kumamoto and who is now studying at Luther Seminary, blessed us by attending my mother's wake. Also in attendance were Pastor Lunder and his wife from one of our supporting congregations in Hinckley, MN.

