

The Bencke Family in Japan



May 2023: 99 番



Don, don, don, kara-ka-ka! (sounds of taiko)

If you ever have a chance to hear Japanese taiko drumming, take the opportunity. Maybe bring some ear plugs because the concerts are often loud. But the energy will draw you in and I can almost guarantee you'll be entranced by the sounds, the power, and the movement. Patrick and I played taiko with a local group here for many years before our rickety knees, coupled with parenting responsibilities and the long drive to practices forced us to become audience members instead of players.

The pictures you see (above) were taken this past March as I began instruction for some of our students in Japanese taiko drumming. The drum was purchased with the generous donations of several congregations who have given regular "5th Sunday collections" (thank you, First Lutheran Church in Stephen, Minnesota!) for a few years and with from special offerings we received from several of our partner congregations during home assignment in the summer of 2022.

I cannot stress enough how incredibly important it is for the music of worship to reflect the deepest parts of our hearts. Music, art, beauty, all of this is evidence of our creative God. When we are able to fashion God's creation into something artful or beautiful that helps us bring our prayers of thanksgiving, joy, lament, petitions, questions, stillness, and praise from our bodies to God's heart through our language, melodies, harmonies, movements, colors, or textures, these are broad expressions of both personal and corporate worship. We come to know God, and God reveals Himself to us through this giving and receiving.

Hymnody in missions has historically not been done in such a way as to encourage churches in the vast kingdom of God to write their own songs. Hymns composed in Europe or the United States were generally translated (some not very well!), and the western melodies, harmonies, and

instrumentations were used to help teach Christian theology. Some cultures, such as those in Africa and South America, have done a better job of composing music and hymnody for their congregations that reflect their heart songs with instruments that speak to their cultural history and are inflected from the very beginning with their own heart languages. Unfortunately, churches in Asia have not been as quick to do the same.

There are many reasons for this that are not indictments on early missionaries who brought their hymnody to Asia. Practically speaking, young churches had to become familiar with Scripture and Jesus' teachings before a theologically robust and poetically rich repertoire of hymnody could emerge. This takes time! Another reason that continues to be the case in Japan is the desire for Christian churches to assert how they are different than the other belief systems in Japan, such as Buddhism and Shinto. To use instruments or melodies that historically emerged from usage in those faith systems has had the potential to evoke a sense of syncretism. Traditional Japanese instruments have a close history with aristocracy, so using a koto or shamisen in a church when Protestant missionaries first came to Japan in the late 1800s would have been an absolute no-no.

Things are changing, however, and contextualization of music and art to use for the worship of God (called ethnodoxology) is a burgeoning field where expertise is being honed in undergraduate and graduate programs. Teaching college students about who God is and how God's love transcends geopolitical or cultural borders is my main heart work in Kumamoto. I love to show students the ways in which God has shown love for Japan through the gifts of music and arts. This term, the choir will do two musical selections that I arranged, both with the phrase "Let Everything that Hath Breath Praise the Lord." One song is set to a Hebrew melody called "Kol Han'Shamah," and the other is set to one of the oldest folk tunes in Japan called "Kokiriko Bushi." The Japanese arrangement will feature shamisen and taiko as we sing about all the interesting sounds that instruments can make in praise of our Lord. Please continue to pray for our college music ministries.

In other news – please continue to keep us in your prayers:

Emilie will join us for the summer while she researches how terminology affects the ways in which mental illness is perceived in Japan.

Hannah just started her third year of junior high (9th grade). She is active on the track team and now officially passed me in height. That means both my girls are taller than me now.

Patrick and Jackie have full loads of classes this new academic year.

Jackie will travel to the U.S. to attend graduation for her PhD next week.

Patrick's parents and Jackie's dad remain in good health, for which we are so thankful.