

News from Nihon*

*Nihon or Nippon is the Japanese way of saying Japan.

Hi there! My name is Laura Slezak and I have moved to Japan as of April 10 as a missionary under the ELCA and in partnership with the JELC (Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church).

The moving process was a complete whirlwind and settling into my new life in Japan has taken longer than I anticipated. I am in an unusual position for the program having moved straight to Kumamoto without any orientation in Tokyo (it's normally several months long, but Covid kept interfering with my departure and subsequent arrival) and jumped straight into my new position as an English teacher. There are definitely many moments where I am still experiencing culture shock and trying to understand how to live out my life and calling in a brand-new-to-me location. I am going to do my best to give you a beginning overview in this first newsletter now that things are starting to settle into a new rhythm.



I am teaching conversational English to nine classes of first year high school students (the equivalent of 10th grade in the U.S.) two times a week at Kyushu Gakuin Senior High School, a Lutheran school under the umbrella of the JELC. In other words, I have about 300 students across varying levels of English and academic ability.

There is a junior high school on the same campus, connected to the senior high school, meaning all of the teachers of both schools are at the same staff meetings, for example. In addition to coteaching the 18, 50-minute class periods with Japanese teachers, I give a homily in chapel roughly every other week. One of the unique challenges of this preaching context is that most of the students have had limited exposure to Christianity and English, so keeping the English and Christian ideas understandable is important.



I knew that building consistent connections in Japan would be key to feeling like I have a home here. Typically, people in my position visit all of the Lutheran churches in Kumamoto during their orientation period and then determine their new church home afterwards. I tried visiting new churches every week when I first started at Luther Seminary and remembered that the lack of consistency would make things harder on me than necessary.

My first Sunday in Kumamoto (Easter Sunday) I went to Oe (pronounced oh-ay) Church, the JELC church right next to Kyushu Gakuin, partly because I knew where it was (important) and I had heard some of the students go there on Sundays. I felt like I could stay at Oe Church quite happily and received permission to do my visiting around at a later date. It makes a significant difference to see the same faces week in and week out.

I have found a good community of people there and as a part of my involvement, at the request of some of the members have taken on leading an English conversation group once a week on Wednesday evenings. There are typically around three or four Japanese adults in attendance and we have great fun thinking about and learning some of the oddities of the English language. I am looking forward to my ongoing involvement at Oe and will be visiting the other churches in the area in the coming months.

Prayer Requests

- ◇ Please pray for all of the students preparing for the end of term exams, that their minds would be clear and well-rested.
- ◇ Please pray that I will have ongoing patience and grace for myself as I continue to build a life in Japan.

The phrase below means thank you for the meal. You use it after you have finished eating, often saying it to your host. I wanted to start by teaching you this Japanese phrase because eating together is one of my favorite social activities and one of my favorite ways to build community.

ごちそうさまでした。

(in Hiragana, of the simpler Japanese character systems)

Gochisoosama deshita.

(in Romaji, the Romanized version of Japanese)

Gochisōsamadeshita (pronunciation guide)

I still remember my seminary professor who said there are two ways to start building community if you don't speak a common language – eating together and playing together. I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to eat many meals with new friends and community members over the past two months, from lunches out with my new friend Naoko-san to a welcome dinner with the area's pastors to dinner with four generations of one Japanese family who have made me feel like a member of the family. I am grateful for these new connections and look forward to many meals to come.