

Introducing Stewardship  
Pastor Sarah Wilson

Dear members of Tokyo Lutheran Church,

It's no secret that the coronavirus has had a terrible effect on the economy all over the world. I'm hearing stories of American congregations that are having trouble keeping their doors open. People are worried about money, so they give less for the support of the church; or, they'd like to give as much as they used to, but they've lost their jobs and simply can't. America is full of small and rural congregations that were already in financial trouble. This time is a real disaster for them. But it's not easy for city churches either—these cost a lot to maintain, and Americans are more afraid than ever of spending time in cities.

Thanks be to God, the economic situation in Japan is not as disastrous as in the U.S. But we are also affected by it. Donations to Tokyo Lutheran have dropped dramatically. Of course, that's perfectly natural and understandable! We were completely closed down for 15 weeks. Since we've reopened, we still have been very cautious about the possibility of infection. Many of you are staying at home to protect yourselves and others. That is the wise and considerate thing to do. But it does mean that it's just more difficult to make a contribution to the church.

So yes, as a congregation, we are facing some serious difficulties about paying our bills. If you haven't given in awhile, please think about doing so! We really need your help. (You can make an automatic bank transfer—see the information after this article.)

But what I learned from conversations with our church council is that even at the best of times, there is almost no teaching or practice of stewardship in the Japanese church. And I have to admit, as an American missionary in Japan, I was really surprised by this!

\*There's a terrible irony at work here. Pastor Matsumoto shared with us that, a hundred years ago, Japanese Christians were extremely devoted givers. They had a simple principle: if ten Christians each gave ten percent of their salaries (according to the biblical model of tithe), then they'd have enough for an eleventh salary—for a pastor. It took only ten Christians to support one single pastor! Obviously, the more people joined the congregation and gave the same percentage, the more other things they could pay for—a building, musicians, a kindergarten.

What changed? Unfortunately... missionaries. That's the irony! It's great that Christians in other countries wanted to support the Japanese church, especially during the

economic hard times after the war. But it seems like missionaries never encouraged the same kind of stewardship that Japanese Christians had already figured out for themselves. Our help may have done more harm in the long run. It's hard to say for sure.

Well, I feel this is a call on my conscience to help. You know as well as I do that Christians make up a tiny minority of the Japanese population. I notice a lot of despair about the prospect of growth for the church among Japanese Christians of all kinds, not just Lutherans and not just members of Tokyo Lutheran. I think Christians here are really discouraged and hope only to survive, but not to grow.

I sure don't have the magic words to change the situation, or a secret plan. But I do know that despair is always a bad strategy. And I know that our Lord loves generosity and hope. So, starting this month, I'm going to share with you what I know about stewardship (next month I'll explain exactly what that word means!). In this way I hope to empower you, as Japanese Christians, to see clearly all the gifts that God has given you, and how you can give these gifts in turn for the upbuilding of His Church and for the care of our neighbors, both spiritually and physically.

For now, let me leave you with this beautiful passage from our Lord Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

"Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Let us as a congregation learn to seek the kingdom of God together! When we do that, all our needs will be provided for.