



Eliot Presbyterian Church

A Diverse Family in Christ . . . *Come and See*

2025 Mission Study

The History of Eliot Presbyterian Church

1869 First Presbyterian Church was organized under the Presbytery of Northern New England.

1874 Eliot Presbyterian Church's building was built in 1874, at the time housing Eliot Union Congregational Church.

1955 Eliot Presbyterian Church came into being with the merger of First Presbyterian Church and Eliot Union Congregational Church.

1965 The first female elders were elected to the Session of Eliot Church.

1980s Refugees from Cambodia arrived in Lowell. Eliot Church supported, welcomed and worshiped with these newcomers, laying the foundation for a thriving Cambodian ministry. These Cambodian members had practiced Buddhism as their family background. At Eliot Church they became Christians.

In the late 1980s an immigrant who has roots in Presbyterianism in Africa joined Eliot Church from Liberia. She was the first of many African people who became part of Eliot Church.

Early in the 1980s Eliot Church served its first Thanksgiving Feast. This event started small, intended for people in the church community who didn't have a place to be for the holiday and for the Cambodian community to learn about this tradition. Over the years the event grew, ultimately serving about 500 traditional Thanksgiving meals each year, and provided an opportunity for as many as 180 people to volunteer to help others.

1990s Eliot Church welcomed immigrant groups from Kenya, Ghana, Brazil, and Cameroon, as well as individuals from diverse countries such as Taiwan, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

The development of a Kenyan congregation through New Church Development resulted in a new, separate, Ushindi Presbyterian congregation.

In the mid-1990s our first African-descent Elder was ordained.

The pastor of Eliot Presbyterian Church at this time was involved in the transition to a multi-cultural church. Staying for 14 years, he was active in the community and proactively reached out to immigrant communities.

2000s Eliot Church received a grant from the Lilly Foundation, which focused on worship and, in particular, music for worship.

Eliot Church began to participate in Community Table in 2006, serving a meal at the YMCA weekly on Saturdays for people who were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. We continued this ministry for nine years.

Two members of Eliot Church wrote the story of Eliot Church's growing diversity and sent it to the PCUSA's story contest in 2008; Eliot Church won an award of \$1,000.

St. Paul's Kitchen began to rent the kitchen and hall of Eliot Church to serve meals five nights a week to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Eliot Church began to take a turn preparing the meal for Saint Paul's Kitchen once a month.

The Cambodian community of Eliot Church developed a ministry to engage those members with limited English who needed guidance with healing from past traumas.

2007 One of Eliot's own Cambodian members was ordained as a PCUSA pastor to lead the ministry with our Cambodian community. He was the first Cambodian Presbyterian to be ordained as a pastor.

2011 Eliot Church's pastor (who had been at Eliot for seven years) resigned after charges were filed and he renounced jurisdiction. As the church healed from this difficult experience, we had an interim pastor for several years.

Throughout this time period, Eliot Church held annual celebrations, including

Cambodian New Year and the Thanksgiving Feast. Eliot's monthly turn serving at St. Paul's Soup Kitchen, Sunday School, and youth group continued faithfully.

2015 Rev. Heather Prince Doss was installed as our pastor in October.

2017 Pastor Heather led a trip to Washington, DC, to view an exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum about diversity in the US titled "Many Voices, One Nation." The exhibit included a photograph of Eliot Church people celebrating Cambodian New Year during the worship service, taken by a church member.

Pastor Heather began a Wednesday Night Supper and Study program, and facilitated the creation of an art gallery in our Library.

The Christian Women's Fellowship of Cameroon joined our church asking to use our building for Bible Study. They joined our worship service, increasing our choir total from two to three. They continued to participate in the life of Eliot Church for seven years.

2019 This year was the 150th Anniversary of the Presbyterian presence in Lowell. We celebrated with a block party and multi-cultural music celebration in May honoring Cambodian, African, Scottish and Portuguese traditions. In November, we finished the year with a catered dinner/dance.

In this year a Haitian Community began to use our sanctuary for their worship services on Sunday afternoons.

2020 The Covid-19 pandemic shut down in-person worship at Eliot. We switched to online services and committee meetings, using Zoom. Homeless people, who lost access to the places they had been able to spend their days, started to camp on our property. In May, Eliot Church opened a Day Center to give our homeless “neighbors” a place to go to during the day.

In this year a church member wrote and filmed a Christmas Pageant, including performances by many members of the church, and presented it to the congregation on Zoom.

2021 In June, we started hybrid worship services on Zoom and in person, taking

precautions to give out masks and seat people 6 feet apart. We also put together a Zoom tech team who would run the slideshow and broadcast the service for members watching on Zoom.

2022 Pastor Heather took a sabbatical, funded by a Lilly Grant. As part of the sabbatical, a church member led the production of a video about Eliot Church, including interviews with many members. The movie premiered at a theater in Nashua after Pastor Heather was back with us.

2024 Pastor Heather announced she would be leaving Eliot to pursue her travel business, Progressive Pilgrimage; Rev. Alvin Padilla came to serve as our Interim Pastor.

Where We Are Now: The Community around Us

Eliot Church is not far from downtown Lowell, Massachusetts, in the city’s historic South Common District. Lowell is a city of 112,000 people, with a poverty rate of 17%. The ethnic composition of Lowell includes 46% white non-hispanic, 23% Asian, 17% hispanic, and 9% Black or African American. Nearly 30% of the people living in Lowell were born in another country.

Eliot’s neighborhood

The South Common park across Summer Street from Eliot Church is used for recreation including soccer, football, and swimming. In the blocks around Eliot Church are houses, small businesses, a public housing complex, a homeless shelter, the Salvation Army, and several group homes. Just a little farther out are the Lowell Community Health Center, and the Lowell

Community Charter Public School as well as a newly built Justice Center.

Our neighborhood has recently experienced economic decline. Gentrification in other parts of the city has pushed more low-income people into the neighborhood, including an increasing number of people who are unhoused. Many of our homeless neighbors suffer from substance use and mental health disorders. In 2024 the Lowell Sun described the area around Eliot Church as a “blighted neighborhood.”

A significant challenge for Eliot Church today is the unauthorized use of our property for activities including drug dealing and use, drinking, toileting, and sleeping overnight. While we offer support to our homeless neighbors inside our building during the day, our property is not suitable

for human habitation. The church staff and leaders work toward the goal of keeping the property clean, safe, and welcoming for all who use it.

Recently we have seen some improvements on Summer Street. The building on one side of Eliot Church was renovated to create 19 units of subsidized housing for people who would otherwise be homeless. Work has begun to transform a historic — but abandoned — school building on the other side of the church into 12 market-rate apartments. We have begun to get help from the police to keep our property clear after hours. As of June 2025, we have seen some small improvements in the condition of our property; however, visitors to Eliot Church, particularly families with children, can feel intimidated by our environment.

Geography

The members and regular participants in the life of Eliot Church travel from 1 to 45 miles to come to church (and a few join us only by Zoom).

- 53% live in Lowell
- 22% live in towns bordering on Lowell
- 8% live approximately 10 miles from Lowell

- 9% live approximately 20 miles from Lowell
- 8% live 25 miles or more from Lowell, with the longest driving distance being 45 miles.

Ethnicity

As of September 2025, the ethnic composition of Eliot Church includes 36% Black or African American, 38% Asian, and 26% Caucasian. Approximately 75% of Eliot's members and participants were born in another country.

Nearly all of Eliot's African community immigrated to the US, the largest number coming from Cameroon. Approximately half of Eliot's Africans live in Lowell; however, our African community also includes several of the people who travel the farthest to come to church.

Nearly all of the Asian community of Eliot also immigrated to the US, with the largest number coming from Cambodia. All but five of Eliot's Asian members live in Lowell.

Nearly all of the Caucasian people at Eliot Church were born in the US and now live in towns bordering Lowell, with only five living in Lowell itself.

Where We Are Now: Our Congregation

As of September 2025, Eliot Church has 94 members on our rolls. The family of Eliot Church includes three groups of people, together forming one community of faith. We have delighted in and struggled with our diversity, working through the years

to demonstrate what it means for many to become one in Christ. We love each other, respect each other, and learn from each other; we also have ministries to meet the specific needs of a particular group.

When Eliot Church started 150 years ago,

the majority of the congregation traced their ancestry to Europe. Church members of European descent continue to participate actively in worship and church leadership today, sharing their gifts of music, teaching, and administration. Most of them are in their 60s or older; they make up a little more than 1/4 of the congregation.

Cambodian people have been at the heart of Eliot Church since the 1980s when they first came to the US fleeing from war. Today Eliot's Cambodian community remains faithful and strong. Over the years we have developed a ministry specifically for these members who have experienced trauma and who have adapted to a new culture and grown into a faith different from that of their childhood. Most of them are in their 60s or older; they make up a little more than 1/3 of the congregation. Because some have very little English, we provide translation as well as Bible study in Khmer.

Immigrants from Africa have been at the heart of Eliot Church's congregation since the 1990s, when we welcomed newcomers from Liberia, Ghana, Kenya, and Cameroon. They have brought a vibrant life to our worship through drumming, dance, song, and the beautiful fabrics that they wear. In recent years our largest group of people from Africa has been Cameroonians, and Eliot has hosted the activities of the Christian Women's Fellowship in the Cameroonian tradition.

A new Presbyterian Church of Cameroon is being developed in the nearby town of Burlington, Massachusetts, bringing both

good news and bad news to Eliot Church. We rejoice with our Cameroonian brothers and sisters as they can now worship on Sundays in their own culture; at the same time we miss them. During this transitional time, we are happy that others from Africa remain a faithful part of our community. They include people from age 3 and up; they make up about 1/3 of our congregation.

Sunday morning

On Sunday mornings a few people arrive at the church by 9:00 to clean up the entryway and make our church a welcoming place. Before the worship service, the choir rehearses, the pianist/organist warms up, and the tech team sets up the sound system and Zoom. The pastor makes preparations for the service and greets people as they arrive.

Worship at Eliot Church is a lively experience and usually lasts about an hour and a half. On average, 43 people attend the service in person or on Zoom. Our worship services include music from European, African, and Cambodian traditions. We take time for testimonies from the congregation, telling how God is at work in our lives, and each person may share their own prayer aloud during our pastoral prayer time.

Two choirs sing in our worship services. Our Inspiration Choir comprises adult members of the congregation who enjoy singing choral music in four-part harmony. This choir sings two or three times a month, sharing anthems that reflect the liturgy of the church season. Our Cambodian Choir comprises Cambodian members singing hymns in Khmer. They offer music once a month.

At Eliot we welcome children to stay in the sanctuary during the service; we don't mind a little noise. There are children's books and activity bags available in the sanctuary. However, in 2025 we have only a few children and youth in attendance.

After the worship service we have a coffee hour, a time to get to know each other a bit better. Everyone who has been at the worship service is welcome and encouraged to participate, but we do not open the doors for others to come in at this time.

Sunday school for children and youth

Deuteronomy 6:6-7: And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

Sunday school is an essential part of Eliot, and we are thankful for the love and dedication from the teachers. The attendance statistics from 2015 to 2023 Sunday school are shown as follows

Year	Teacher	K-5th	Junior High	High School
2015	11	24	7	9
2016	9	27	3	12
2017	9	17	2	10
2018	12	38	3	11
2019	12	25	8	10
2020	9	22	11	11
2021	?	9	9	7
2022	?	10	2	15
2023	?	2	7	11

From 2021 to today, the operations of Sunday School were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 2021-2022: The church worship and Sunday School teaching were both through Zoom.
- 2022-2023: Sunday School teaching was resumed in person with only two classes — kindergarten to Grade 5, and youth
- 2024-2025: Due to the low attendance of students and lack of teachers, Sunday School was put on hold

In order to resume Sunday School, both students and teachers are needed.

Multigenerational Bible study

Since the Covid pandemic, Christian education has lagged at Eliot Church; however, in March 2025, with the leadership of a church member and the Interim Pastor, we launched a pilot multigenerational project aimed at providing times for learning, fellowship and a light meal. The gatherings happen after worship twice a month and feature homemade soup from various cultures. The study has focused on "Dining with Jesus" — stories from the gospels, each of which includes a shared meal. Approximately 12 people have attended the sessions, ranging from teenagers to retired people.

Confirmation Class

Every two years, Eliot Church has offered a Confirmation Class for youth in seventh grade and older. Recently the pastor has led the class with a curriculum she designed herself for the program, using hands-on,

action-based activities to increase the students' understanding of the Bible, how to live as a Christian, what it means to be a church member, how to participate in church life, and what it means to be Presbyterian. Recent classes resulted in 5-7 youth becoming members of the church.

Men of Eliot

Eliot Church's men's group meets every Tuesday evening on Zoom. The group of about seven men gathers for an hour to an hour and a half of Bible study, prayer, and fellowship. The group also serves the meal for St. Paul's Kitchen on behalf of Eliot Church six times per year.

Cambodian Ministry

Our Cambodian ministry is more than just gatherings — it's a family. We encourage one another in faith, grow spiritually together, and support each other through prayer, home visits for shut-in families, and special events that bring our community closer. Our mission is to share God's Word and love, embracing our diverse brothers and sisters in Christ as we walk this journey of faith together.

Weekly Ministries

- Cambodian Adult Sunday School meets at 9:00 a.m., followed by Khmer worship services on the second and third Sundays of each month
- On the first and fourth Sundays, we join the main worship service as one family in Christ
- Choir rehearsal is held on the third Sunday
- Cambodian Bible Study meets every Thursday and Saturday

Annual Celebration

The Cambodian New Year celebration at Eliot Church has been a cherished tradition for over 40 years. The celebration takes place each year in mid-April during the worship service and includes a feast afterward. What began as a simple celebration has grown into an expression of spiritual transformation, reflecting the journey from Buddhism to Christianity.

Despite enduring war, hardship, and unimaginable trials, the Cambodian community of Eliot Church has remained steadfast in faith. Cambodian New Year at Eliot Church is a time to honor these struggles, blending Cambodian traditions with testimonies of God's grace, overcoming suffering, finding hope in Christ, and dedicating our lives to Him.

Deacons

Eliot Church has a Board of Deacons with nine members: three classes of Deacons each serving a three-year term. The Deacons make calls and visit members of the congregation who are sick or who have limited mobility, as well as sending cards to them. They also pray for the members of the church, and offer transportation to those who need such help, especially on Sundays. In the past, the Deacons helped organize Eliot's Thanksgiving Feast, engaging leadership, getting supplies, and supporting the work in areas of need.

The Deacons also set up for communion and clean up afterward on the first Sunday of each month.

St Paul's Soup Kitchen

St. Paul's Soup Kitchen is a 501(c)(3) non-profit renting space for their operations at Eliot Presbyterian Church. They provide dinner Monday through Friday, 52 weeks a year — regardless of rain, sleet or snow — to the poor, elderly and families in need.

A total of 30 participants (local churches and private establishments) serve the meal on a rotating monthly schedule, using Eliot church's kitchen to prepare the food and our hall to serve the meals.

Starting in 2005, Eliot Church has taken its turn to serve on the first Thursday of each month. Church members usually arrive at the church around 3:00 p.m. to prepare the dinner. At first we had three groups of people doing this work, but now there are only two: our Men of Eliot group prepares the meal every other month, and an individual church member prepares the meal on the alternating months. Additional volunteers from Eliot Church come to serve the dinner from 5:00 to 5:45 p.m., and the cleanup is from 5:45 p.m. to 6:15 p.m.

Day Center program

Mission Statement

The Eliot Day Center is a hub where our unhoused neighbors can access spiritual care, person-centered support, and tangible resources for obtaining and maintaining safe and stable housing.

- Hub means that multiple partners converge at Eliot Day Center to provide services to our guests.

- Spiritual care means we facilitate a welcoming environment of rest, peace, creativity, and community for all our guests, regardless of their faith tradition.
- Person-centered support means that we build relationships with our guests, empower them to identify and use their unique gifts, and respond to the needs they identify for themselves.
- Tangible Resources are the physical things we provide like daytime shelter, meals, clothing, food, ID documents, and referrals to other partners.

A Day in the Center

Day Center staff arrive at 9:00 a.m. and begin to set up for the day. At 10:00 the doors open, and people come in, heading for the kitchen window, where coffee and breakfast are ready to be served.

Our guests take their coffee and food to the tables in Olney Hall; they eat and socialize, use the bathroom, charge their phones, and use the wifi. Throughout the day, the staff tidy up the property and clean and sanitize spaces that are in use.

The closets on the stage are stocked with clothing and personal hygiene items; Day Center staff give these to anyone who asks, while supplies last. Our Director of Client Services and Case Manager meet with any of our guests who desire to take steps toward becoming housed. This includes assistance with applications for low-income or supported housing, obtaining birth certificates and IDs to pave the way toward employment and housing, referrals to detox programs, and obtaining SNAP benefits.

On Wednesdays, the Day Center holds a worship service at 11:00 a.m. in the library; communion is served. Through the week our partner agencies including VinFen, Eliot Human Services, the CO-OP Team, Community Teamwork, and the Lowell police are available to assist our staff as needed and work with our guests. Our guests can get help with potential overdose and other medical needs from Lowell Community Health Center at a mobile medical unit that comes to the neighborhood on Mondays and Thursdays.

At 2:30 p.m. staff from St. Paul's Kitchen begin to arrive; Day Center staff clean up the hall and kitchen, close their offices, and leave for the day, while our guests may stay until supper has been served.

Outreach Committee

The Outreach Committee of Eliot Presbyterian Church oversees the external ministries of the church. Currently, the committee is primarily serving as the steering committee for the Day Center, caring for the broad strokes of the center's functioning, financials, and safety. Any safety concerns or any policy directives (or changes) that may arise due to different situations are dealt with by the Outreach Committee. It meets once a month.

Media/Communication

Eliot Church's Sunday morning worship service is offered online through Zoom. On average 6 people join us this way each week.

Eliot Church maintains a website at www.eliotlowell.org, primarily focused on providing information about the church to people who are new to Lowell and looking for a church home. The site is kept up-to-date with minimal effort, adding posts when there is significant news and adjusting the otherwise static information when church programs change.

We send an email to members and friends of the church each Friday with information about the coming Sunday worship service and updates about the life of the church. The email includes a calendar of events and some basic information about connecting with the church. About 120 people receive the email, and about 50% of them open it, according to the reports MailChimp provides.

For more time-sensitive communications, we use a texting service. We send texts about special worship services, new programs about to begin, or moving the service online-only because of weather.

Staff

Eliot Church has 13 staff members on payroll; all of them work part time. Our staff is diverse, including six who are white, three who are Hispanic, three who are Asian, and one who is Black. Eight staff members work for the church itself, and three work for the Day Center program. There are also two people on our staff with split jobs, working for the church in one role and the Day Center in another role.

Church staff positions

- Interim Pastor — 3/4 of full-time
- 2 Cambodian Chaplains — totaling 4 hours per week
- Choir Director — 3 hours per week
- Pianist/Organist — 7 hours per week
- Building Manager — 15 hours per week
- Building Maintenance Assistant — 8 hours per week
- 2 Janitorial Staff — totaling 16 hours per week
- Office Admin / Treasurer — 12 hours per week

Day Center program staff

- Executive Director — 8 hours per week
- Director of Client Services — 20 hours per week
- Director of Operations — 15 hours per week
- Kitchen Manager — 20 hours per week
- Caretaker — 20 hours per week

Where We Are Going: Our Mission Statement

Eliot Presbyterian Church is a diverse community of followers of Jesus Christ, working together to share God's love. We put our faith into action through service to our neighbors in need.

Our Future Congregation

In the next five years, we see our church growing and remaining a vibrant community.

In order to make that growth possible, Eliot Church will make a priority of keeping our building and property clean, safe, and welcoming, so that newcomers will be able to join us.

We will also improve communication within the congregation, ensuring that each person will be "in the loop" regardless of what language they speak or their technology preferences.

Our congregation will demonstrate the Kingdom of God as we deepen our unity

and welcome newcomers across economic levels, ethnic groups, and ages, as well as both new and long-time Christians.

We will demonstrate the character of Jesus as we pray for the sick, lead people to Christ, and serve our neighbors.

We will demonstrate the Body of Christ as each person uses their particular gifts to seek the lost and welcome them into the family.

As our congregation grows, we will revive our Sunday school for children, youth programs, and fellowship times.

Our unity in Christ will be seen in our worship and the celebrations we enjoy together.

Our Future Outreach Ministry

At the time of this writing, our outreach ministry is a Day Center for people who are homeless, as described elsewhere in this Mission Study report.

In 2026, two significant new programs will open in the City of Lowell:

One will be the Restoration Center, a large building offering a 10-bed supportive space for people experiencing the effects of substance use; a low-barrier community space dedicated to harm reduction, including showers, laundry, computers, telephones and a kitchenette, and respite care; a 16-bed detoxification unit; and a 45-bed clinical stabilization unit. The center will be staffed 24 hours a day.

Another will be a women's shelter, providing emergency shelter to more than 50 women over the age of 18. In addition to emergency housing, case management and other wraparound services will be provided to help the women get back on their feet and find permanent housing.

These two new projects will significantly improve the lives of people who are homeless in Lowell, most likely reducing the need for our Day Center in its current form, and will offer Eliot Church an opportunity to rethink the way that we can best serve our neighbors.

Many possibilities may be considered, such as offering only food and referrals at the Day Center; or offering only spiritual care and job training at the Day Center; or shifting the focus of the center toward assisting new immigrants and refugees in Lowell rather than people who are homeless.

We imagine our new pastor will begin working at Eliot Church as these changes are unfolding and will lead us as we make new plans and move forward.

Our Future Pastor

Eliot Church is looking for a pastor first of all who will be our spiritual leader and Bible teacher, a person with deep faith. We are looking for a person who will care deeply about the congregation as well as our building and its surroundings.

The following qualities will also be important:

- experience interacting with diverse people
- comfort with human interaction within a wide variety of situations, from the Sanctuary to the street
- a preference for work in an urban setting
- the ability to communicate effectively, including through the use of technology
- strong organizational skills
- experience with management, including focusing on a clear mission, overseeing staff, and developing and implementing policies for a ministry such as our Day Center
- fluency in more than one language would also be a plus

Respectfully submitted by the Mission Study Committee: Gordon Donkoh-Halm, Lori Hoffman (co-chair), Joyce Hughes, Sothara Ly, Henry Ntoro, Michael Sheu, June Taing, and Martin Wigall (co-chair)