



Multicultural Congregational Support

[Home](#) > [Evangelism and Racial/Cultural Diversity](#) > [Multicultural Church story contest](#) > [2006 Winners](#) > [East Liberty Presbyterian Church](#)

2006 Multicultural Church story contest winner

East Liberty Presbyterian Church, *The Cathedral of Hope*

East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pa., (ELPC) has a long history of encouraging the growth of a diverse congregation. In fact, ELPC is so geographically diverse that our newsletter mailing goes to 96 different ZIP codes. This creates a very different congregational spirit than in a neighborhood church and may make it easier to welcome all Christians to participate fully in the life of the church.

The present church was built on a base of diversity in the 1930's. The upper-class congregation hired a village of Italian stone craftsmen and their families to create the present neo-Gothic cathedral that occupies one square block in the heart of a Pittsburgh neighborhood. Some of these Italian workers and their families became active members of the congregation. Pittsburgh has changed dramatically since the sanctuary was dedicated in 1935. The once-grand East Liberty neighborhoods now hold apartments, and today's congregation has a wide mix of racial, economic and social classes. Racial inclusiveness started at ELPC in the 1950s and remains a priority. The congregation today is 22% African-American, the Session is 27% African-American and the Deacons are 48% African-American. ELPC is an inclusive church that is committed to serving God in spirit and in deed, welcoming all people who come to seek the Lord.

ELPC was instrumental in beginning the East End Christian Ministry, a ministry to the poor and homeless in the 1970's. This organization has evolved into a large non-governmental organization, the East End Cooperative Ministry (EECM). ELPC devotes half of the basement level for a daily soup kitchen, food pantry and 35-man homeless shelter operated by EECM. ELPC also houses a weekday EECM tutoring center, involving many ELPC volunteers in the operation. These activities have brought new members to ELPC, many of them unchurched at the time they started with us. Such people bring fresh ideas, questions about faith and belief that open



PC(USA) Home

[Home](#)

[Who We Are](#)

[Becoming a Multicultural Church](#)

[Resources](#)

[Leadership Development & Events](#)

[Giving Opportunities](#)

[Past Events](#)

Multicultural Church Stories



Racial Ethnic & Women's Ministries/PW

the minds and hearts of the rest of us. These members, of varied race, gender and religious history, contribute to the breadth of the Christian vision at ELPC.

As part of our commitment to feeding the hungry and helping the poor, ELPC has addressed a failed urban renewal project around the church that left the area with empty buildings and a loss of vision. The church has faith that God calls us to be a witness in this place, so we joined with other church and secular leaders to rebuild the economy of the area and to ensure that adequate housing was available for residents of all income ranges. The effort introduced ELPC to a new group of people who cared about social justice and who came to see in ELPC that Christ's call to minister to the poor could be expressed in what they—and ELPC—wanted to create in the East Liberty neighborhood. Again, outreach prompted growth. These new members are diverse in race, gender and class but united by an interest in serving God in the world and in belonging to a church that stands by them and participates with them in their secular ministry.

ELPC, perhaps inspired by its cathedral architecture, also began in the 1990s to reintroduce aspects of Christian spirituality that had been de-emphasized in 20th-century Protestantism. This has greatly enriched the scope of spiritual involvement at ELPC. The efforts include:

- ❖ **New ministries.** We have had **Taizé** worship for more than a decade. Some of our most active members came first to Taizé, and then to Sunday worship. We have introduced a **Labyrinth ministry** that brings in both visitors and potential members. We have sponsored **public lectures** on spiritual dimensions in modern life. Some people came to listen and stayed to worship. We have **Centering Prayer and Spiritual Development**, which again have been channels for new members with different backgrounds to start first with small-group participation and then join ELPC.
- ❖ **New worship experiences** to meet the diverse backgrounds of our members. We have six interwoven worship services. The **8 am Good Samaritan worship** is organized by a lay committee and includes the men of our homeless shelter. The **9 am Morning Glory service** is a joy and praise service before the **11 am Sanctuary worship**. A **Taizé Prayer service** at 7 pm every Wednesday. A contemporary **Koinonia Service of Praise**, led by ELPC youth and young adults, at 7 pm the second Sunday of each month, and a spirit-based **Holy Ground Service of Wholeness and Healing** offered at 6 pm the third Sunday bimonthly March through November.



The multiple offerings are not divisive, but inclusive. Many members attend two or three of these services weekly.

Our youth group exemplifies our diversity. Some of the members are suburbanites whose families have long ties to ELPC. Others are African-American teens both from our immediate community and from some distance away. We have teens whose families are not churched but who get up early on a Sunday morning to ride the bus for half an hour to get to ELPC. The youth also learn that the world in which they live is much larger than ELPC by monthly community work missions and summer mission trip activities.

Not all ideas worked. An effort to reach spiritually inquisitive young people involved renting a night club for Sunday afternoon music and lectures on spirituality, social issues, religious issues and political issues. Despite a large organizing effort with publicity, this did not succeed in bringing people from this age/interest group into the church. We also ran an advertising campaign, using billboards and newspaper ads that emphasized the things that made this congregation different from the typical parish church. We attracted many new members, but the departure rate almost matched the enrollment rate because the people who came were not rooted in Pittsburgh.

An important step in diversification at ELPC came in our adoption of a Mission Statement that affirmed that Christ calls all believers to serve the Lord, irrespective of sexual orientation. This is a controversial issue in the church at large, but not at ELPC. In the Mission Study prior to our call of Dr. Randall Bush as senior pastor, the congregation ranked their degree of agreement with the statement that "I am a member at ELPC because it fully includes GLBT believers in the life of the church." Seventy-five percent responded affirmatively; eight percent disagreed; the remainder expressed no opinion. We understand that there are different readings of Scripture on this point. However, as we read Romans, the book does not end at chapter 1:32. Paul continues in chapter 2 to warn believers about usurping God's prerogative to choose those who will serve the Lord in faithfulness. We cannot turn aside those whom God has called.

ELPC's latest multicultural venture is the Field Learning Project for children and youth from recent immigrant families of the Pittsburgh area. This project is carried out through a partnership between East Liberty Presbyterian Church and the Islamic Community Center of Pittsburgh. Through the work of volunteers from both organizations, as well as university students, monthly field trips are provided to

cultural sites, such as libraries and museums. The purpose of the project is to help the children learn about the educational resources available in the community, and to develop relationships with the volunteers, who are from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The story of diversity at ELPC is not yet complete. We wrestle with the issue of maintaining a caring community in a congregation with a large geographic spread. We struggle to maintain an order of worship that allows the Spirit to speak to people of widely varied religious backgrounds. We include music that relates to our diverse backgrounds: a Jazz Mass, African Drumming, hymns from our Scottish and Welsh heritage along with Gospel songs and Spirituals. We strive to maintain our contact with young people, both single and married, in an urban culture that does not emphasize church going. The ongoing mission of ELPC is to live in such a way that all who enter our doors experience the presence of the Holy Spirit and the warm embrace of fellow Christians, so that they leave enriched by the time spent with us, be it one hour or a lifetime.

ELPC DEMOGRAPHICS

From the 2003 Mission Study report, the ELPC congregation listed 630 active members plus 177 inactive members who have chosen to stay on the rolls. The active membership is 64% female, 56% white, 22 % African-American, 22% "other". The Session has 30 members, of whom 8 are African-American. The Board of Deacons has 21 members, 10 of whom are African-American.

The congregation has a mixed religious heritage. From the Mission Study responses nearly all the members were raised in the church, but a significant number (40%) have returned to regular worship after having spent time away. Approximately 1/3 of the members have a Presbyterian background. The majority was raised in other Protestant denominations. About 15% of the congregation was raised as Roman Catholic.

ELPC STORIES

Why do people come from all over the Pittsburgh area to worship and participate in the congregational life at ELPC? There are stories from members and strangers alike about the special feeling that permeates ELPC. A non-member who comes occasionally remarked to a member-friend, "Whenever I walk through those big front doors, I feel that I've come into a sacred space, a place where the Holy Spirit is present." A member who joined recently remarked, "As soon as I came through the door, people made me feel welcome." A member who joined after attending occasionally over many years said, "God just wouldn't let me stay away. There are too many

opportunities for service here for me to be anywhere else.” Another very active member who joined recently remarked that on her first visit, she sat next to a worshipper who was Jewish but found a spiritual home at ELPC. She also observed in the choir, among the service leaders, and in the pews there were all kinds of people joined to worship—just the place to be challenged to grow in Christian faith in all dimensions of living. Still another active new member tells of being invited to ELPC to give a lay message on a day when new members were being accepted. The mixture of that group—in gender, race and economic class—was so challenging about what it meant to live out Christ’s welcome to all believers that transferring to ELPC was the only way to respond.

These stories happen to originate from people of different races and genders—people are people first at ELPC. The same comment might come from a man or a woman, an African-American or white or “other”, a straight or a gay member. The common experience is that our congregation celebrates the fullness of God’s creation in living up to its Mission Statement: **Reaching Out, Reaching Up, Reaching You.**

Submitted by ELPC members Michele Bossers, Elizabeth Hopkins, Justin Johnson and Jim Russ on behalf of [East Liberty Presbyterian Church](#).

116 South Highland Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15206
(412) 441-3800

TOP ▲

[Who We Are](#) | [Congregations](#) | [News and Events](#) | [Ministry and Vocations](#) | [Resources/Publications](#)
[Giving and Funding](#) | [US and World Mission](#) | [Search pcusa.org](#) | [Home](#)

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For more information:
Raafat Girgis
(888) 728-7228 x5233
[Send email](#)

Or write to:
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202

[Contact PC\(USA\)](#)