



### **Pilgrim Lodge Leadership Team:**

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### **Contact us!**

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[www.pilgrimlodge.org](http://www.pilgrimlodge.org)

Elizabeth Charles McGough,  
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Lydia Hoffman,  
Assistant Director

## **Pilgrim Lodge**

### **Annual Report, September 2026**

Greetings from Pilgrim Lodge, the Outdoor Ministries Program of the Maine Conference United Church of Christ, located in West Gardiner on Lake Cobbosseecontee, the ancestral homeland of indigenous tribes of the Wabanaki Confederacy. As our peak season has wrapped up and we host programs and retreat groups throughout the fall, we have so much to be grateful for!

This season, we welcomed approximately 600 participants to Pilgrim Lodge camp programs and nearly 1,000 individuals through retreat groups. This robust gathering of people for summer camp to meditation retreats, conferences to youth development programs, brings vitality to our ministry and diverse revenue to sustain our operations. Ours is a ministry of hospitality grounded in the welcome that “all who come in love have a seat at our table” and around the campfire!

**Programming:** Pilgrim Lodge programming is the responsibility of the Outdoor Ministries Team (OMT): Ashley Martinage, Rev. Emelia Attridge, Rev. Danielle Keller, Erin Shultz, Skyler Keiter, Kelsea Bickford, Antonio Pulsoni, Leslie Smith-Green, Rev. Grace Bartlett and Adi Bertinet with Lydia Hoffman, Assistant Director, and myself as staff.

- This season, instead of purchasing an externally-created curriculum, a subcommittee of the OMT, with a variety of content contributors from among Pilgrim Lodge volunteers wrote a Pilgrim Lodge specific curriculum called “It Only Takes a Spark.” The goal was to ensure that our programming aligned with our theology, camp priorities, and objectives for the camper experience. The curriculum encouraged campers of all ages to reflect on their individual, God-given sparks and how, when combined with others, our camp community can make a powerful glow in the world. It was met with great enthusiasm from our volunteers and campers!
- This summer, we changed the name of our historic “Mission Project” to “Outreach Program” to evoke a spirit of connection beyond camp that we hope to nurture through learning about the work of partner organizations and how to support values-aligned initiatives locally and globally. A Pilgrim Lodge Subcommittee comprised of Rev. TJ Mack, Karen Choate, Andrew Hunter, Allie Rimkunas, Lee Deater-Deckard, and myself is dedicated to guiding a learning journey to explore the history of the land, once home to indigenous peoples of Maine, and our relationship to our present-day Wabanaki neighbors. This was the focus of the summer Outreach Program as we invited campers into developmentally-appropriate conversations about how we can listen to our Wabanaki neighbors and support them on their terms. In that spirit, we collected over \$5,000 in donations for two Wabanaki-led organizations with whom we are forging relationships: [Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness](#) and [Speaking Place](#), a program focused on revitalizing and strengthening Passamaquoddy language.



*"We continue to choose Pilgrim Lodge because it is a tremendous experience and my daughter finds it to be one place where she can always be with people who are 'real', where there is no 'posturing' and people aren't out to impress people but instead are honest, real and genuine. That is something that doesn't come easy and has to be fostered and cultivated by the organizers, deans, counselors, and all involved."*

*-Camper parent*



*"[The LIT Program] helped me learn how much you can make others happy by being a good and creative leader. I liked the flexibility of the program because it made my completion of the program my own. I would love to do this again!"*



- This was our second year of partnering with Catawba College to provide opportunities for their students to experience nurturing faith-formation in youth through as counselors. We welcomed two students this season and look forward to future summers of partnership with the college.

**Priorities and Innovation:** The Pilgrim Lodge Leadership Team leads the strategic direction of Pilgrim Lodge. This year, we were awarded a national Character at Camp Grant from the American Camp Association, a competitive national initiative supported by Lilly Endowment, Inc. We will receive \$100,000 over two years to strengthen programming that nurtures integrity, community-mindedness and leadership. This was the first years of our project to realize a variety of key programmatic, capital improvement and sustainability initiatives that had been in the dream phase prior to receiving funding.

- We built a new Campfire Circle in the woods across from the dining hall. This new sacred space at camp provides a site for building community in a circle format where everyone can see one another and be welcomed into relationship. We began a new tradition of an opening campfire at the beginning of each camp session. Additionally, it is now a versatile program space that is enjoyed by campers and retreat groups alike.
- The funds allowed us to add two new elements to our low ropes course and staff a Challenge Program Specialist role to provide a specific focus on Challenge facilitation for team-building and community development among campers with training by High 5 Adventure Learning.
- We implemented our first-ever Leader-in-Training (LIT) Program and designed a Leadership Mentor position on the staff to support leadership development among high school youth who opted into additional programming opportunities beginning in the spring. Our first ever cohort of 10 LIT participants designed their own Capstone Project for camp and 4 had the opportunity to serve as Counselors-in-Training during the season.
- We worked with a consultant, Spencer Traylor of Samara Strategies, to write curriculum for key program priorities at camp related to character development. The curriculum includes strategies for facilitating Restorative Culture: a framework for community building, community tending, and community repair to support an environment of welcoming diverse identities It including the use of circle practice for community-building, Leadership Development Activities for campers across our developmental spectrum and best practices for facilitating Challenge Programming.
- The grant funded some of the personnel time of myself and Lydia to implement the scope of new initiatives through the grant. A key facet of the project included building relationships with values-aligned organizations that would be positioned to help us invite new populations of campers to Pilgrim Lodge with funds to support scholarship and accessibility. During this season, we were able to solidify relationships with four organizations that referred 11 new campers to Pilgrim Lodge.



*"We were looking for a place for our kids to connect with the natural world and peers outside of their school social world screen free and safe. We were looking for a place to explore faith and values in a nurturing setting. We couldn't be more pleased."*

*- Camper Parent*



*"My favorite part was sharing the word of God with loving people. I see positive change every time I come in people, process and facilities."*

*-Adult Camper*

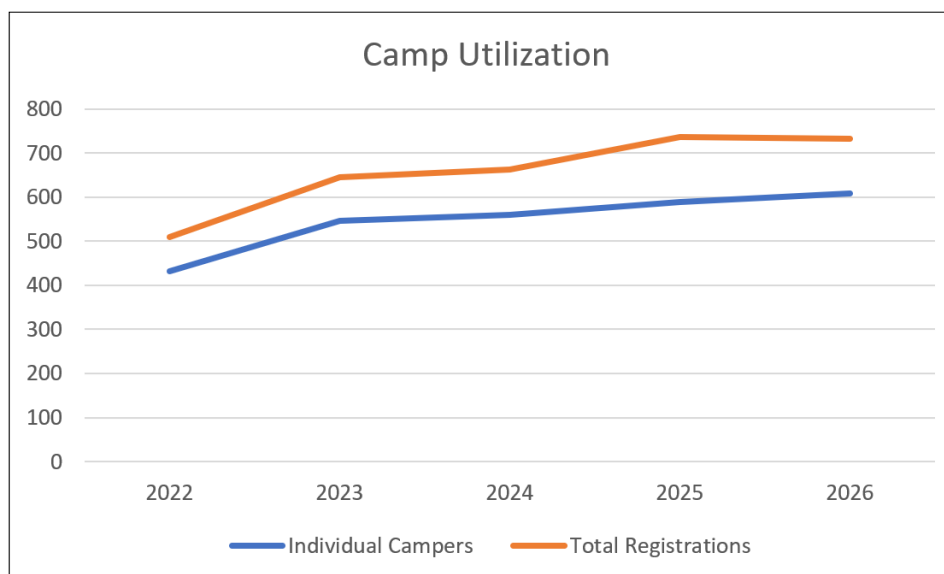


*"This week helped me experience being a leader a lot more and healthily pushed me out of my comfort zone. Camp helped me gain many skills especially like living with others in a slightly challenging environment like the island. Singing together and silence in nature was personally a very spiritual experience for me. So was chapel and vespers."*

*-Island Camper*

Through the project, evaluations were completed by campers, families, volunteers and staff to incorporate input across all stakeholders in our design of programming for the second year of the project as we plan to sustain our new initiatives beyond the period of the grant.

**Financials and Utilization:** Pilgrim Lodge ended the 2025 fiscal year with a balanced budget, allowing us to fund our "Pilgrim Lodge Improvement Fund" for the second time since re-opening in 2022. This fund saves resources for future facility upgrades and was a priority highlighted in the pre-pandemic sustainability study for Pilgrim Lodge. We believe that important elements to the sustainability of Pilgrim Lodge include maintaining high quality, relevant programming for our camper population, creating relationships with mission-aligned partners to work with us as collaborators, and providing hospitality to outside organizations who offer retreats at Pilgrim Lodge.



This year, Pilgrim Lodge maintained camp registrations in line with the 2025 season. Notably, utilization in the category of half-week and week-long youth programs increased by 13% over the prior summer. We developed a wait-list for a couple of sessions for registration due to full enrollment. This balanced out some slight declines in utilization of our shorter retreat sessions intended for adults and families. For the second summer, we offered a "Bridge Overnight" program, allowing youth campers to stay between two week long sessions. We were thrilled to have a handful of campers stay for 2-3 weeks this summer. Our registration income rose by approximately 11%, reflecting the increase in utilization of our longer, youth sessions. We are able to accurately match camp pricing to operational expenses while keeping the price of camp accessible. We have a three tier pricing system that allows families to opt-into the price of camp that is most comfortable for their budget. A scholarship fund supports those for whom the lowest tier is prohibitive. In 2026, we dispersed over \$33,000 in scholarships to support access to camp. These funds are a combination of investment income, grants (the Carpenter Grant for Pride programs, Agnes Lindsay Trust, Character at Camp Grant and funds

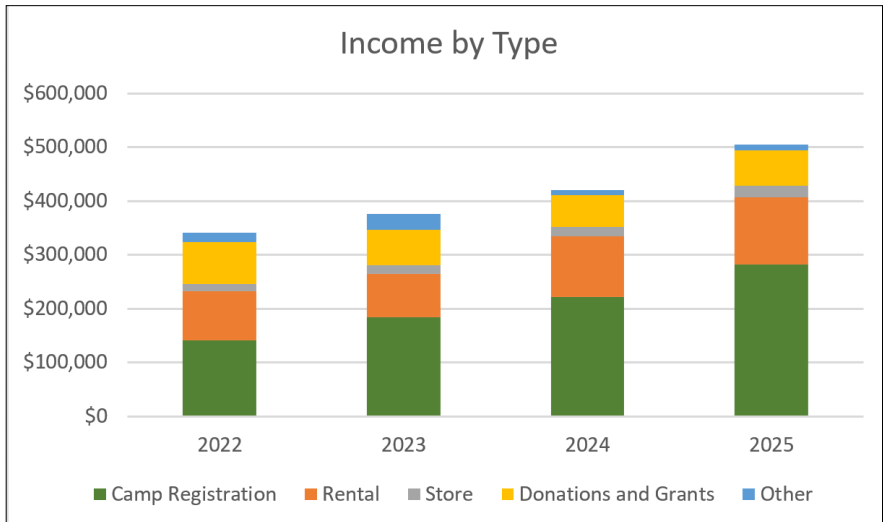


*“Thank you so much for hosting our Fellowship Retreat. Once again, Pilgrim Lodge magic worked its way into our program seamlessly, powerfully, and oh so effectively. I know the work and play we did together was deepened and amplified by the beauty of the physical space and by the values and mission you embody across your team and program.”*

*-Partner Organization  
Retreat Group Leader*



accessed via Maine Summer Camps), and the incredible generosity of individual donors within our camp community.



- We increased the number of rental groups at Pilgrim Lodge, providing a home for 19 different organizations to host their programs for a total of nearly 1,000 additional people using our facility across the season.
- We achieved our goal of transitioning to solar power as our primary energy source. Our array has generated enough electricity to power camp and minimize our costs to only meter fees. The array will power the Farmhouse as the Conference Office is established on the property. While the array was paid for by remaining capital campaign funds from the 2010's, we were able to leverage 30% of the cost through the Inflation Reduction Act. We offer gratitude to Rocky Ackroyd (former staffer and long-time PL volunteer) of Green Sun, LLC for donating his time to design, lead the installation, and maintain the array.

**Gratitude:** Our ministry is abundant due to the time, talents and gifts shared with Pilgrim Lodge. **Individual donors and churches who financially support “Friends of Pilgrim Lodge”** and our scholarship fund keep camp accessible and our operations sustainable. Thank you to our **Mattress Drive donors!** Due to your incredible generosity, we replaced all mattresses across camp this season! **Local churches** play a vital role in supporting access to camp through extending the invitation to camp and providing scholarships for attendance. Volunteers are our lifeforce. During the 2026 summer season, approximately 110 volunteer **Deans, Counselors, Chaplains and Nurses** were joined by **additional volunteers who supported work on our facility, in our kitchen, office and supplementing our program.** An incredible group of **curriculum writers** helped to make our program purposeful and centered around our values and priorities. Our **summer staff** is the backbone to our core program and operations. They rise early to cook breakfast and stay up late to play music for vespers (and everything in between)! We are grateful for **our team at the Maine Conference UCC** for their collegiality and support. Thank you for breathing new life into the Farmhouse. We can't wait to join you in the new office!

We are deeply grateful for the ecosystem of people and partners who support our ministry. We are honored to be a space of renewal, faith-exploration and community-building as our campers spread their sparks in the world!

Respectfully submitted by Elizabeth Charles McGough, Pilgrim Lodge Director