



SAINT JAMES' IN THE CITY

ANGLICAN/EPISCOPAL

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THE FIRST 100 YEARS



An Interview with Roger and Marilyn Thomas

The life of a church is the creation of its parishioners. Roger and Marilyn Thomas, who have been active with the Food Pantry for many years, are two of the longest-attending members of Saint James' Church.

Below is a photo of them taken in the courtyard of the church on their wedding day in 1965. They are surrounded by their loving families and three beautiful children (the fourth is holding the camera), which, if you recall the rules of that time, implies a story.



In 1965 divorced people were not allowed to remarry in the church. This was a dilemma for two faithful Episcopalians who had found true love the second time around and wanted to sanctify their union at Saint James' Church.

Roger had been a life-long Saint James' parishioner. He had been baptized at the church and had served as an acolyte where he had earned as much as 10 cents for serving at weddings. It was emotionally and spiritually important that he and Marilyn be married there, but the rules of the time were inflexible. No church weddings for divorcees. Some people tried to have their previous marriages annulled, but the primary grounds for an annulment, a lack of consummation, was deemed unlikely as Roger and Marilyn each had two children from previous unions.

On October 22, 1965, Roger and Marilyn went to the church office and were married by a judge who was also a parishioner. Then the Associate Rector Jim Engels led them to the church chapel where he

repeated the wedding service in the past tense, thereby blessing the civil union.

Roger was a native Los Angelino. Marilyn was born in New York City, but grew up in Palm Springs. They met where the both worked at the insurance firm of Marsh and McLennan. Of the many societal changes they experienced in their lives, the changes at work were among the most profound. When Marilyn started work at the company, women couldn't rise above the position of secretary. By the time she retired, she had become a vice president, just like Roger, but, notes Roger, "she had the word 'Senior' in her title, which I never had."

They have both witnessed enormous change at Saint James' over the years. "Back in the 30s," said Roger, "we were Low Church. Communion was only given once a month." Marilyn remembers that even in Palm Springs "all the women wore hats to church." In 1946 Roger's sister, Julia, marriage was held at Saint James' and it was considered the first post-war high society (Continued on other side.)





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(Continued from reverse)

wedding in Los Angeles. Roger has a photo of the event in which the men are seen dressed in tailcoats and all the women in evening gowns. But that world was over by the early 1960s.

What was the cause of the great exodus? Roger thinks it was a ballot initiative in the early 60s whose success ended housing covenants in the city. "In those days," says Marilyn, "black women could buy dresses at upscale stores, but they weren't allowed to try them on first." When housing restrictions against non-whites and non-Christians came to an end, many of the Hancock Park elite abandoned mid-city Los Angeles for the Westside. What had been the bedrock of Saint James', fell away and a long period of soul searching and rediscovery took its place. "It's the best thing that could have happened," said Roger. "The only reason we are a healthy, growing church today is because we decided to embrace diversity."

Marilyn and Roger have both served in leadership positions at Saint James'. Roger has been a clerk as well as a junior and a senior warden. During his tenure he successfully nominated the first black man to serve on the vestry. Roger also served as vice president of the Cathedral Corporation Board. During that period the physically unsound downtown

cathedral was sold and the current cathedral center in Echo Park was created.

Like most women of that era, Marilyn's path was more circuitous. For most of Saint James' history, women weren't allowed to serve on the Vestry, but Marilyn was one of the first. Later she would serve as Senior Warden. They have continued to serve Saint James' Church over the years by running one of its most essential outreach ministries, the Food Pantry. "In the early 90s, we had a lot of assistance from Filipino and Armenian members of the community. These days we receive enormous help from our Korean parishioners," notes Roger, who also convenes the cooking crew every three weeks.

An embrace of diversity has also been experienced in their personal family life. All five of their children married partners who were not part of the Anglican faith. Jewish, Mormon, Presbyterian, agnostic, they came from a variety of backgrounds, but, notes Marilyn, four of the five returned to the Episcopal Church. When asked what changes they would like to see at Saint James' in the future, Marilyn replied, "What I would really like to see is the return of young families with children."