

Centennial Conversations

~ interview by Ben Martin

Meet Jim White



Born in 1948, Jim White grew up in Redondo Beach where he was raised in the Presbyterian church. Returning to his home church while in college, he remembers “my Mom’s friends wouldn’t talk to me because – believe it or not – I was a hippie with hair down to my shoulders.” That experience contributed to a “young adult lapsed phase” during which he met his lover, Donald. He recalls that he and Donald would go to church on special occasions. and say “That was really nice; we should look for a church and go more often.” But as a quintessential late 1970s gay couple, the fact that Saturday nights were party nights meant that Sunday was primarily “a recovery day.”

“Our lives changed dramatically,” Jim shared “when one of our best friends overdosed and died.” Looking for more than reading the Sunday papers and golf on TV, Donald and Jim started church shopping: “I had very specific requirements for architecture and music but it never occurred to me that I’d be able to stomach anything I heard from the pulpit,” he said. At one point Donald – who had been raised in the Episcopal Church -- suggested, “We should check out that Episcopal Church in Pasadena” but Jim was worried it would be too far to drive.

They went anyway. They heard George Regas preach. And they were looked at each other and said, “Oh my God this is the place.” They were greeted, welcomed and went through the new members Covenant Program joining the church in 1985 – the same year that GALAS (Gays And Lesbians at All Saints) began. “We weren’t really joiners,” said Jim. “I expected we’d go and sit in church and that would be that.”

Just months later, Donald starting getting sick. He drove himself to LA County General Hospital in the middle of the night, was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and died 12 days later. Jim was suddenly “alone with no friends” but for people he’d met at All Saints. “The staff, the clergy – people I’d never met – sent cards, asked if there was anything they could do ...I was blown away by all of that. They lifted me up and carried me through that time of grief.”

He felt he needed to pay back what he received during that period, so he became a joiner – joining a group of about a dozen people brainstorming what they could do to address the HIV/AIDS crisis. Jim arranged to have a phone line installed in the basement of an office building at All Saints, and they printed up stickers to call that number and plastered them around town.

Within a few months, they had two or three support groups going, with half a dozen people in each and the AIDS Service Center was born. “I thought I was going to get involved and pay back what I had received. But I learned that the more you put into something, the more you get out of it.” He became President of the Board of AIDS Service Center, which ultimately had a staff of 40 and a \$5 million/year budget. “That really changed my life, totally.” The verse that now summarizes for Jim our mission and call as Christians is Matthew 25:40: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.”

In the decades since 1985, the non-joiner, gay Presbyterian hippie kid from Redondo Beach has become a nationally recognized leader in the Diocese of Los Angeles and the wider Episcopal Church. Jim has been in the forefront of the struggle for LGBTQ inclusion, served for 25 years on the Diocesan Commission on Ministry, as a Deputy to multiple General Conventions, and done several tours of duty on the All Saints Vestry (notably on the Buildings & Grounds Committee.) He has been recognized for his service with the honorary titles of Canon of the Diocese Los Angeles and Canon of the Cathedral of St. Paul – making him that rarest of church beasts: a “Double Barreled Canon.”

Retired now, Jim divides his time between Puerto Vallarta and the Silverlake house he and Donald bought together – the one he was afraid was too far away to drive to church in Pasadena. And how grateful we are Donald ignored him and they came anyway!

Question 1: What’s one thing you’re the most grateful for about All Saints Church?

“It changed my life. I’m a totally different person after All Saints than I was before, in terms of focus of my energy on the rest of the world, rather than on just me and my immediate circle of family and friends. The work that I did at both the AIDS Service Center and in the Beyond Inclusion ministry— those are the two things that I’m probably proudest of in my life. I know we really changed things for the better -- both in the church and in terms of caring for people.”

Question 2: Tell us a story of a favorite memory of your years at All Saints.

I have so many, but a favorite is definitely those times we spent with Beyond Inclusion at General Convention working the booth at the exhibit hall. We did some amazing work, had some great times with some amazing people -- and had great popcorn!

Question 3: What is your greatest hope for All Saints as we move into this next century here at 132 N. Euclid?

“I hope we continue the legacy of an outward focus in our ministries -- the kind of focus that led to the creation of organizations like the AIDS Service Center, Day One, Union Station (to name a few) which became gifts that keep on giving as independent agencies of their own.”