

The History of St. John's Episcopal Church, La Verne

St. John's Church began with the need of a single child to attend Sunday school with friends. Our calling was to bring an Episcopal church to the community, to provide spiritual formation for a generation, and to make a difference in the lives of our members and others in the community.

On March, 14, 1961, Marge and Richard Vicenti hosted the first organizational meeting in their home in La Verne. On May 17, 1961, the Standing Committee of the Diocese recommended to Bishop Bloy that a preaching station be established in La Verne and that land be purchased by the Diocese for a church site. A favorable action of the Diocese was reported and three persons were appointed to a Bishop's Committee. Initially, the congregation requested the preaching station be named "St. Andrew's"; however, "St. John's" was ultimately selected from a list of names acceptable to the Bishop.

On October 22, 1961, St. John's held its first service at the American Legion hall with Fr. Thomas Marshall as celebrant. Forty-five persons attended. St. John's was granted mission status in 1963, two years after the first services were held.

From 1963 to 1969, St. John's vicar was Fr. Arthur Lovekin. During his tenure, St. John's Episcopal Church Women held several rummage sales and opened a thrift shop in La Verne to raise money for a permanent church location. For several years, the thrift shop proved to be a steady source of income as well as a witness of St. John's presence in the community. In 1966, St. John's moved its services from the American Legion hall to the LeRoy Boy's Home, and land was purchased. In 1969, Fr. Lovekin left St. John's to pursue advanced studies.

From April 1969 to April 1976, Fr. Richard Avery served as vicar. On November 16, 1969, there was a groundbreaking ceremony at the present site. The ECW's fundraising work completed, the thrift shop closed its doors. Several changes in the Episcopal Church affected the stability of the congregation: the ordination of women, a new Book of Common Prayer, and the introduction of Lay Eucharistic Ministers. St. John's reflected the tensions within the national church and our country. During this time, a congregational questionnaire was circulated. After the results were collected and compiled, Fr. Avery resigned. It became clear that St. John's survival was dependent on the congregation taking ownership of the direction and future of the church.

From October 1976 through December 1978, Fr. Dean Foley served as vicar. During this time, attendance declined and Fr. Foley left for personal reasons.

From February 1979 to August 1980, Fr. Dan Suders served as priest-in-charge at St. John's.

From October 1980 to August 1988, Fr. Bruce McPherson served as vicar and infused St. John's with a spirit of energy and optimism. With his leadership, St. John's became a self-supporting mission. In 1987, Bishop Rusack joined the mortgage-burning

celebration. The calling to be a parish developed during this period. A group named the *Ambassadors* called on new families, and a prayer chain was established. St. John's became a vibrant church with an expanded ministry, growing youth programs, a paid music director, and a communal atmosphere characterized by significant social activities. Fr. McPherson also spent much time and energy with several Diocesan committees. In 1988, he was reassigned to Diocesan staff, and later appointed Canon to the Ordinary.

From December 1990 to December 1993, Fr. Dan Williamson served as vicar. He was known for his praise services and enthusiastic Bible study classes. One concern at this time was St. John's ability to provide financially for his family's security. Fr. Williamson left for a larger, more conservative, and evangelical parish.

From January 1994 through December 1995^[MSOffice1], St. John's was served by two priests-in-charge: Fr. Kevin Taylor and Fr. Chas Belknap, respectively.

From December 1995 through May 2004, Fr. Larry Hunter served as the seventh vicar and first rector of St. John's. Tremendous growth marked his tenure. The staff expanded with the addition of a permanent deacon, Jerry Tucker; an assistant priest, Mo. Jan Holland, Fr. Hunter's spouse. New ministries and opportunities for involvement were developed and took shape. Fr. Hunter's first years were focused on building a strong youth ministry, an active church school, a men's group, and refurbishing St. John's sole building. Other clergy attended St. John's and offered their services. In 1996, St. John's bylaws were amended to include a Youth Representative on the Bishop's Committee who would have a seat, voice, and vote.

In 1997, St. John's successfully applied for parish status. The enormous growth of St. John's was evident in an ambitious building program. In 1997, the existing building was renovated. It houses the sanctuary, sacristy, and Sunday nursery. Vicenti Hall was built as a multi-use building containing offices, a commercial kitchen and a large gathering space. Extensive landscaping was completed on the entire campus. A seminarian-intern, Earl Gibson, joined St. John's staff. This period of rapid change and growth resulted in budget shortfalls. Diocesan grants were needed to meet financial obligations.

In January 2003, Earl Gibson was ordained to the priesthood. The 2003 national controversy surrounding the election and consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson challenged many parishioners. That same year, from August until mid-December, Fr. Larry took an extended educational leave, straining the remaining staff to meet the congregation's needs. During this time, Mo. Jan was in charge of the congregation.

At the January 2004 Annual Meeting, budget shortfalls required that the two assistant clergy be reduced to half-time status. Mo. Jan subsequently resigned and her last service at St. John's was at the end of February. In April 2004, Fr. Gibson resigned his position and accepted the position as Youth Minister for the Diocese of Arizona. His last service was in May.

In May 2004, Fr. Hunter resigned to accept a call to a church in northern California. He celebrated his last service in July. During this emotionally turbulent time, beginning in March, pastoral leadership was provided by Fr. John Keester, Fr. Walter Hannum, and Rev. Stuart Ensberg—all members of St. John’s. Despite these setbacks, Dan Morrow was hired in August 2004 as part-time lay Youth Minister. This reaffirmed St. John’s commitment to youth.

In October 2004, with considerable financial support from the Diocese, a measure of continuity was regained in the appointment of Fr. David Jackson as priest-in-charge under special circumstances. Fr. Jackson had previously served as a non-stipendiary assistant and regularly attended St. John’s with his family. Fr. Jackson left St. John’s in December 2005 for a position better suited to his ministry. He currently is part-time Interim Dean of the Episcopal Theological School in Claremont while completing his Ph.D. at Claremont Graduate University.

In March, 2006, Mo. Marilyn Omernick was appointed priest-in-charge. She has overseen projects laying a foundation for St. John’s administration. These include a parish software program and a restructured accounting system. In July 2006, after much reflection and consultation with the Diocese, St. John’s successfully applied to return to mission status. Currently, St. John’s has embarked on a path of renewal and redefinition and has benefited from generous Diocesan financial support.

In September 2006, our youth ministry has full-time funding aided by another Diocesan grant. The major accomplishment of 2006 was that our youth raised sufficient funds to complete their summer Journey to Adulthood pilgrimage to England—a dream three years in the making.

Reconciliation of diverse views and budgetary concerns are still issues at St. John’s. These are reflected in the membership data below.

Total Households in 1997	128
Total Households in 1999-2000	139
Total Households in 2001	133
Total Households in 2002	148
Total Households in 2006	98

St. John’s remains true to its founding intentions. We are a vibrant church. We believe in growing together in Christ by welcoming all people, gathering to worship, deepening our knowledge of God, raising Christian children, loving and nurturing one another, and serving those in need.