

“They Looked at Us Like an Astronomer Would View Pluto”: The Redbank Mission and the Case for Rural Episcopalians, 1872-2021¹

Jacob A. Battle, Christian E. Mumpower, & Colin J. Wood

The now-defunct St. Mary’s Redbank Episcopal Church—the most northern, remote, and poor establishment in the Diocese of Pittsburgh—is situated amidst the picturesque farms, hamlets, and rolling hills of the Redbank Valley in rural Pennsylvania.² Suddenly, at the bottom of a hill, the old Episcopal mission appears. Overlooking the Allegheny River, this church spent countless years as the worship and social center for the virtually abandoned village of Redbank and its tight-knit community that generationally called this mission home. It is of simple construction, seating between fifty to seventy-five congregants, and is embraced by a proud cemetery boasting veterans from the Civil War to the Gulf War.³ For about one-hundred-fifty years and through numerous tribulations, St. Mary’s Redbank Episcopal Church withstood poverty, neglect, and disenfranchisement from the overarching entities that controlled it. Due to St. Mary’s environmental and societal setting, the authoritarian arm of the diocese coupled with the frugality of country character created a clash between urban and rural religious customs.

John Barrett Kerfoot and the Establishment of the Episcopal Missionary Network

¹ We thank the St. Mary’s Redbank Church Board, especially Rev. Dr. Gordon V. Barrows, John R. Wilson Jr., and Jim Shuster. Additionally, Rev. Kimberly Karashin, archivist of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Also, we thank Dr. Jeremy Bonner, David Downs, and John Wilson for their insight on this mission and the state of the Diocese.

² From 2021 onwards, St. Mary’s is no longer affiliated with the Episcopal Church and bears the name “St. Mary’s Redbank Multidenominational Church.”

³ Among those were Frederick Shuster, KIA in the Battle of the Bulge, and William (Bill) McChesney, awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross and Purple Heart from WWII. Also buried are Cortland D. Shuster, Cortland M. Shuster, Robert James Wilson, Guy Elmer Smith, Robert M. McCollum, Blaine Mast, Walter Campbell, Marnie Larue Fiscus, and Robert M. Hays.

In November 1865, seven months after General Lee's surrender at Appomattox, the Trinity Cathedral in Pittsburgh was filled with several dozen clergy and laity concerning the establishment of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh and the appointment of its first bishop. The Right Reverend John Barrett Kerfoot (1816-1881) was elected to be the first leader of the neonate diocese. Born in Dublin, Ireland, Kerfoot was baptized as a Presbyterian before his family moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He studied under William Augustus Muhlenberg at the Flushing Institute in New York, where he became ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1840. Kerfoot served as president of St. James College in Hagerstown, Maryland until 1864, whereupon he became president of Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.⁴ He won two-thirds of the vote and was consecrated as bishop of the Pittsburgh Diocese on January 25, 1866.

At once, Bishop Kerfoot began expanding the diocese's influence around Western Pennsylvania. He began mass church planting across the region, focusing on urban areas. From 1866 to 1871, Kerfoot established twelve new parishes, two-thirds of them in Allegheny County.⁵ In the early 1870s, the diocese planted sixteen missions—mostly centered around Fayette County—and an additional fourteen missions in the latter half of the decade.⁶ Though the preeminent focus of his initiative was urban evangelization and church establishment, the influx of immigrant settlers to rural Pennsylvania led Kerfoot to modify his position. Understanding well the importance of supporting the many isolated missions, pitied in the sense of their blight conditions, Kerfoot proclaimed their cruciality to spiritual outreach aimed at those of Anglo backgrounds. Furthermore, he emphasized the particular importance of outreach to those

⁴ Hall Harrison, *Life of the Right Reverend John Barrett Kerfoot, D.D., LL. D., First Bishop of Pittsburgh, Vol. 1: With Selections From His Diaries and Correspondence; 1816-1864* (Forgotten Books, 2018), 1-401.

⁵ From Jeremy Bonner, *Called Out of Darkness Into Marvelous Light: A History of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, 1750-2006* (Wipf and Stock, Eugene, OR), 61. Also see *Diocesan Convention Journals of the Diocese of Pittsburgh* for the years 1866-1871.

⁶ *Ibid.* Also see *Convention Journals* for the years 1870-1879.

working in backbreaking industries such as lumber, oil, coal, and iron at the 1870 diocesan convention.⁷

In a sense, Kerfoot hit the nail on the head with what occurred in these rural villages conducting arduous industrial work. The Redbank Mission was no outlier in this phenomenon. Found in northern Armstrong County, the village was built where the Redbank Creek flows into the Allegheny River and was settled around the old Red Bank Furnace, which began smelting pig iron in 1841. It employed one hundred fifty people and produced fifty tons of pig iron weekly. The Allegheny Valley Railroad had a stop here, which established the village called—at the time—Redbank Landing.⁸ The settlement possessed a hotel, post office, train station, and a restaurant atop a floating dock that claimed to serve eleven hundred meals a day.⁹ In the 1860s, Redbank’s pig iron furnace was converted to burn coke.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the transition to coke burning was a less profitable venture, which led to the decline of the area.¹¹ Overall, the peak population of the area—around the year 1865—was four hundred fifty.

During this period, the Episcopal Diocese chose the village as a premier spot to establish one of their dozen missions. The location on which the church was built was originally a cemetery that housed a single girl who died in her infancy.¹² The Diocese bought the land from local resident Ellen Turner for a single dollar.¹³ The area had a history of settling mostly Lutherans with the addition of Methodists and Presbyterians who held congregations decades

⁷ *Convention Journals*, 1870, 55-58.

⁸ Another name St. Mary’s Redbank Church records mentioned was “Redbank Furnace.” And local newspaper is “Haysville.”

⁹ Information gathered by armstrongtrails.org. See Armstrong County Historical Society Archives for more information.

¹⁰ Coke is a coal-based fuel with a high carbon content. It is made by heating coal in the absence of air. It is used primarily in iron smelting. For more information-
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coke_\(fuel\)#Industrial_coke_furnaces](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coke_(fuel)#Industrial_coke_furnaces).

¹¹ *Armstrong County Pennsylvania: Her People Past and Present* (Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1914), 258.

¹² Interview with David Downs, June 21, 2024.

¹³ From Robert Smith Esq.’s *History of Armstrong County, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Waterman, Watkins, & Co., 1883): 186-200.

before the cornerstone was laid at St. Mary's Redbank.¹⁴ The only mode of transportation to the church in this period was by railroad or on foot.

The land was bought in April 1872, and construction for the expectedly small church began soon after. Among the additions to the building were custom glass panes imported from Ireland, entirely unique and thus impossible to replace.¹⁵ Later that year, Bishop Kerfoot visited the church to confirm the first class and bestow the Episcopal blessing upon the infant mission in dedication to St. Mary, the mother of Christ.¹⁶ The mission was placed under the watchful eye of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in nearby Kittanning, which, for the first half-century, sent clergy north by rail whenever they could to hold services and administer communion. The first rector of the mission was the retired priest Reverend William Hilton, who began traveling north from Kittanning every other Sunday to lead services. Hilton had a history of supporting marginalized Episcopalians. In 1847 and 1849, he was the only Western delegate to vote in favor of seating delegates from predominately African American parishes in Philadelphia.¹⁷ In a similar fashion, Hilton dedicated the remaining years of his life to the hinterlander congregation at Redbank, who crowded into the small parish every chance they had. In the first report of the mission in 1873, it was noted:

We have a small Sunday School, twenty-five pupils, and three teachers, and a large Bible Class, taught by myself on the Sundays I hold service there, which is on every alternate Sunday. The amount of money raised in this Parish during the past year, including Rector's salary, is about \$250. A very handsome paling fence has been

¹⁴ *Armstrong County Pennsylvania*, 260.

¹⁵ Interview with John Wilson. June 27, 2024

¹⁶ Pauline Smith, *St. Mary's Episcopal Church Centennial 1872-1972*

¹⁷ From Bonner, *Called Out of Darkness Into Marvelous Light*, 49. Pulled from *Convention Journals of the Diocese of Pennsylvania*, 1849, 18-20, 42-46.

erected in front of the Church and some other improvements on the Church lot have been made during the present year. Attendance on Sundays [is] always good.¹⁸

Hopeful positivity was cast to the blossoming mission on the banks of the Allegheny. At the same convention, Kerfoot referenced that Hilton's congregation "had gathered flock chiefly of coal mining families and overseen the building of a nice little church now awaiting consecration."¹⁹ Certainly, St. Paul's and the Diocese supported this congregation as it embarked on its quest to cradle the spiritual ganglion of this rural area.

Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Parishioners, Poverty and the Missionary's Duty

A quintessential part of early life at St. Mary's was the coal industry. Missionary reports from Hilton state that most, if not all, of the congregants were coal-mining families. There were several mines scattered throughout the region; one in particular was the Monarch Mines on the south slope of the hill St. Mary's rests on. Late nineteenth-century coal mining culture in Upper Appalachia points to widespread mistreatment, dehumanization, and abuse from constrictive company owners. This mining zone—known as the Lower Kittanning Bed—possessed over one and a quarter billion tons of removable bituminous coal, leading to dozens of mining villages cropping up across the region, Redbank being one of them.²⁰ St. Mary's parishioner John Wilson recalls the busy railroad junction in town, "The trains would come south...car after tanker car of oil...and then came the hopper cars, for the coal...the chain of hopper cars would stretch almost down to the dam." Fellow parishioner and former railroad worker David Downs notes that

¹⁸ *Journal Convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, Report of Missions* July 3, 1873, 84. The report's title was "St. Mary's Church Redbank, Armstrong County, July 3." The mission's name was the "St. Mary's Mission." There will be other missions in the Diocese with the same name in the future.

¹⁹ *Journal Convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh*, 1873. Pulled from a history written in the early 2000s by unknown individuals affiliated with the Diocese *St. Mary's Episcopal Church Redbank 1865*, 2.

²⁰ Miller, E. Willard. "The Industrial Development of the Allegheny Valley of Western Pennsylvania." *Economic Geography* 19, no. 4 (1943): 396.

“everything was freight, and there might have been two or three a day that came through...coal trains, from the strip mines.”

Scholar E. Miller Willard asserts that coal mining villages “exhibit characteristics of impermanence, as is true of many towns whose industries are based on destructive exploitation. Many of the villages are company owned, with rows of similar homes and company stores.”²¹ The homes were often cheap, the streets were unpaved and ill-maintained, and the sanitation was feeble. This was on purpose because a coal mine was not a long-term investment; when the mine inevitably dried up, the company could quickly abandon the village and find another mine.²² The miners had no money apart from credit intended to be used at a company store, therefore, they had very little independent currency.

To add insult to injury, the work within the mines was both arduous and dangerous. The mines were dark, void of oxygen, and full of pollutants, which caused respiratory problems for the workers. Originally, the ore would be dug out by pick and be manually taken out via wheelbarrow.²³ Technological advances in gunpowder and railcars made the work more efficient but evidently increased the peril of mining accidents, which periodically claimed the lives of the miners and even their families.²⁴ The work was thankless, deleterious, and provided meager profit, leaving many immigrant mining families to suffer under the guild of the company. For the mission at Redbank, it would be the only positive enforcement of their lives. Though the diocese offered no financial relief, it brought spiritual sustenance to the destitute congregants. The church acted as a beacon of hope amid their toiling, and they dedicated themselves to the

²¹ Ibid, 397.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hoffman, John N. “Pennsylvania’s Bituminous Coal Industry: An Industry Review.” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 45, no. 4 (1978), 356. For more information on the coal industry in Western Pennsylvania, read Thomas H. Coode and John F. Bauman, *People, Poverty, Politics: Pennsylvanians During the Great Depression* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 11-23.

²⁴ Ibid., 357.

parish in any way they could. But one way they could not was through financial donations. Hilton clarified this when reporting on the poor sum of offerings from the parish at the next year's diocesan convention.

St Mary's is empathically a poor Parish; consisting chiefly of miners, whose wages are paid altogether in store goods; and this accounts for the very small amount of money raised this year, which, including Rector's salary, only amounts to \$100. But the poor must have the Gospel preached unto them, and I am willing to do my share in this work. The attendance is always very good, and I am not without reason for believing that my labors are not altogether in vain, but that some seed falls in good ground is bringing forth fruit unto life eternal.²⁵

This is a recurring theme throughout this mission's century and a half-history. The parish consisted of around twelve families, or sixty congregants, throughout the years.²⁶ The poverty experienced by the community of Redbank prevented the congregation from amassing more than single-digit offering sums for many years.²⁷ This meant that St. Mary's lost the Diocese money every year due to repairs, utilities, and other miscellaneous costs without the bolster of offerings. However, hope gleamed through the dedicated and spiritually zealous population who adored the church. These themes were consistent with the next year's report: "Most of the people composing this Parish are miners who receive little or no money for their labor; this will account for the very small amount of money raised here. In other things, the Parish is as prosperous as

²⁵ Hilton, Wm. *Journal Convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, Report of Missions* 1874, page 101.

²⁶ For more specific information on the attendance and cost, view the yearly *Diocesan Convention Journals* from the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

can be expected. The attendance on Sunday is always good, and our Sunday School is more prosperous than ever before.”²⁸

Hilton’s last year as rector in 1876 saw the effects of the mining industry hit the village of Redbank. He reported in the *Convention Journal* the same sentiment as before with the mission's poverty and spiritual zeal but added a dejected anecdote on the future of the church. “Most of them are dependent upon mining operations, and these being discontinued last fall, several of them were obliged to leave in search of work elsewhere in order to procure means of support for themselves and their families.”²⁹ This drop did not cripple the parish, but it certainly hindered the inkling of progress made towards evangelization and procuring funds for the diocese. Despite that sorrowful revelation, the parishioners remained spiritually dedicated to the small church on the hill that they had attended since birth. This was affirmed by the next missionary, Reverend D. M. McCafferty, “Whenever service is held in this church, the church is filled with worshippers.”³⁰

Far from the grounds of St. Mary’s, the diocese struggled to maintain missionary work throughout Western Pennsylvania. Firstly, missionary clergy, especially those serving rural congregations, were required to travel great distances under strenuous schedules. Additionally, throughout the first decade of Kerfoot’s missionary episcopate, the Diocesan Board of Missionaries requested funds to uphold their ability to maintain the structural integrity of their missions.³¹ The treasury struggled to fulfill these wishes while neglecting other aspects of diocesan attention. Kerfoot died “exhausted by the toll that life in western Pennsylvania

²⁸ Hilton, Wm. *Journal Convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, Report of Missions* 1875, 99.

²⁹ Hilton, Wm. *Convention Journal of the Diocese of Pittsburgh Report of Missions* 1876, 100.

³⁰ McCafferty, D. M. *Convention Journal of the Diocese of Pittsburgh Report of Missions* 1878, 89.

³¹ *Convention Journal of the Diocese of Pittsburgh* 1880, 34-35.

inevitably took” in 1881, leaving his unpopular vision for a staunch community of rural parishes for other Episcopal leaders to grapple with.³²

Kerfoot’s successor, Reverend Cortlandt Whitehead (1842-1922), had this stress of a melancholy, financially meager diocese placed on his back. In a letter from a rural layman to the bishop, he bitterly asserted, “the diocese has fallen continually behind what it used to be. Its contributions for missions... are not up to what they were... the diocese, clergy and laity alike, are dead spiritually, and this seems to be generally admitted.”³³ Bishop Whitehead was assured that his predecessor was unliked and he would make “more friends there in one year than [Kerfoot] made in fifteen.”³⁴ He entered into a diocese that lacked structure, charity, and infrastructure within education and public health.³⁵ But he still had to deal with the expensive maintenance of local missions, which the diocese failed to fulfill. At the 1882 Diocesan Convention, Whitehead practically begged for donations due to the treasury being empty.³⁶ The reason for the economic blight derived from urban parishioners’ disdain for Kerfoot’s domestic mission network and wanted the Church’s focus to shift to foreign missions.³⁷

For the rural missions, it posed a different incentive for urban benefactors. Due to their social position, these congregations had a greater ability to compete with other Protestant denominations spiritually, though issues formed over transporting clergymen to them.³⁸ In the 1880s, Reverend William White reported struggling to visit St. Mary’s, especially during winter. “Financially, the mission is under difficulty, as the report shows, from the state of the iron and

³² Bonner, *Called Out of Darkness Into Marvelous Light*, 71.

³³ J. K. Mendenhall to Rev. Cortlandt Whitehead, October 30, 1881, RG2/21, box 2BP, Archives of the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

³⁴ Rev. J. H. Hopkins to Rev. Cortlandt Whitehead, October 31, 1881, RG2/2.1, box 2BP, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh.

³⁵ *Church News*, September 1886.

³⁶ *Convention Journal of the Diocese of Pittsburgh* 1882, 40.

³⁷ Bonner, *Called Out of Darkness Into Marvelous Light*, 71.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

coal markets, as the congregation is mainly supported by these interests, but otherwise, it is as prosperous as could reasonably be expected.”³⁹

St. Mary’s continued to prevail through these diocesan dramas, its ministry served by either neophyte priests—for training purposes—or emeriti who had agreed to spend the last years of their lives serving the Episcopal Church. Starting in 1888, a candidate for Holy Orders, Samson Dimmick, began assisting White in his old age.⁴⁰ Originally from England, Dimmick was a Methodist Episcopal before converting to the Anglican faith in the late 1880s.⁴¹ The newly vested Reverend Dimmick served several parishes and missions in Armstrong County during the 1890s while headquartered out of Kittanning.⁴² At St. Mary’s, he led the congregations with lay wardens William Stewart and S. A. Taylor supporting him.⁴³ Dimmick served the Redbank mission with ardor but had to withdraw from the ministry in 1904 due to Parkinson’s disease crippling his body, leaving him homebound.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, he still “performed occasional acts” to anyone traveling down to his house in Kittanning.⁴⁵ He was replaced by Reverend John Taylor, who worked part-time out of St. Thomas, Oakmont, until his death in 1908. From 1908-10, Reverend Clarence E. Ball of Holy Innocents, Leechburg, traveled “up river” to serve the mission.⁴⁶ It is worth noting that rectors would serve several congregations due to the establishment of more missions within the diocese. Transportation conveniences and close proximity often allowed them to lead weekly services within urban missions, but this did not apply to rural missions, such as St. Mary’s. Priests would usually venture to a single mission per

³⁹ *Convention Journal of the Diocese of Pittsburgh Report of Missions* 1885, 117.

⁴⁰ *Convention Journal of the Diocese of Pittsburgh Report of Missions* 1888, 139.

⁴¹ *St. Mary’s Episcopal Church Redbank* 1865, 3. Also, see *Journal of the Erie Conference for the Episcopal Church* 1887.

⁴² Information from *Convention Journal of the Diocese of Pittsburgh Report of Missions* from 1889-1902.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *History of St. Mary’s Redbank Episcopal Church 1872-1909*. Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *St. Mary’s Episcopal Church Redbank* 1865, 3.

week, and due to their advanced age, there are inconsistencies and more prolonged periods between services.

During this period, most of the diocese was moving away from its Kerfootian roots of establishing and supporting rural missions. At the turn of the century, the diocese had bigger fish to fry on account of national Episcopal movements, a large influx of Catholic immigration to the Pittsburgh area, and the stress of maintaining favorable relationships with other protestant denominations. Unlike St. Mary's Redbank, rural and isolated missions were experiencing neglect from mother parishes.⁴⁷ Whitehead addressed this issue, showing particular concern with parishes that overlooked financial support for missions.⁴⁸ This unanimous failure of wealthier parishes to contribute to their missions was frustrating to parishes that did, such as St. Paul's Kittanning, which consistently supported its missions, including Redbank.⁴⁹ It was clear that though Whitehead understood the problems with missionary support, he did not prioritize them. The economic recession of the 1910s also took a toll on missionary support within the Diocese. However, this was virtually unfelt by the 'emphatically poor' congregants at St. Mary's.

Changing Diocese, Stagnant Mission: St. Mary's Redbank from 1910-1960

In accordance with Pittsburgh's rise as a budding metropolis, the gaze of the diocese turned evermore to urban Episcopalians. Also, overall sentiment from the Episcopal Church desired a centralized faith with national outreach.⁵⁰ These dilemmas evermore contributed to rural parishes being pushed to the side as clergymen in Pittsburgh had to deal with a changing diocese and national church. With St. Mary's, this population of a dozen families was

⁴⁷ Bonner, *Called Out of Darkness Into Marvelous Light*, 96.

⁴⁸ *Convention Journals of the Diocese of Pittsburgh* 1894, 40.

⁴⁹ *Convention Journals of the Diocese of Pittsburgh* 1899, 122.

⁵⁰ Bonner, *Called Out of Darkness Into Marvelous Light*, 114; 116.

unconcerned with what was happening in the urban centers. As the mines inevitably dried up, many transitioned their labors to farming and other rural industries. Just as coal mining was moneyless, so was farming, which only contributed to the mission's history of philanthropic blight. The church still served the community as a spiritual oasis and an educational one. Though Sunday school was still practiced, the parish house was used as a one-room schoolhouse that educated grades one through eight.⁵¹ During the 1910s, St. Mary's was served by Reverend Lewellyn Foulkes and Archdeacon Charles J. DeCoux.⁵²

DeCoux carried a charitable missionary spirit, impressing the importance of outreach to Italian immigrants coming to the Steel City in droves.⁵³ He faithfully supported his missions while the Diocese was facing yet another financial crisis in the 1910s. Venturing deeper into the twentieth century, it was becoming clear that missions were viewed as servants to communities rather than a means of making good Episcopalians.⁵⁴ In 1920, it was reported that the St. Mary's Redbank mission was consistent with that sentiment. "A small hamlet of railroad people with no other Church for several miles... There are no amusements in the village, no fire equipment, no community organizations of any kind, and the Missionary here, by tact and progressiveness, could soon become a leader and could make the Mission the center of the whole village life."⁵⁵ Missionaries who served other missions in Armstrong County shared this new idea regarding them, specifically the neophyte Chickasaw and Cadogan missions.⁵⁶ Letters to the diocese from

⁵¹ Angi Keller, "In This Village: River and Rails at Red Bank," *New Bethlehem Leader-Vindicator*, June 29, 2004, A6.

⁵² *St. Mary's Episcopal Church Redbank 1865*, 3

⁵³ *Convention Journals 1918*, 65

⁵⁴ Bonner, *Called Out of Darkness Into Marvelous Light*, 135.

⁵⁵ Report of the Rev. M.S. Kanaga, June 1920, Missionary Committee of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, PG4A/2.5:1. Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh.

⁵⁶ Report of the Committee on Established Work, January 1921, Missionary Committee of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, RG4A/2.5:1, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh.

Armstrong County show that St. Mary's was interconnected with the newer missions and was centered around St. Paul's Kittanning who sent out priests to serve the congregations.⁵⁷

The next rector to serve the mission, Reverend Alfric J. R. Goldsmith (1921-1935), ministered there for over fourteen years. He was of English origin and headquartered his ministry in Kittanning. Goldsmith and his wife, Amanda, fell in love with the congregation and desired to be buried amongst their friends. He later became the only priest to be buried in the St. Mary's Redbank Cemetery. As the vicar during the Great Depression, Goldsmith had to persevere through the financial downturn, which crippled the Diocese and led to the Cadogan mission closing. Most, if not all, parishes in the Diocese faced large sums of debt and a steep decline in income, but the experience at St. Mary's was decidedly different. Earlier, it was mentioned that many of the congregants worked in farming and other rural industries. These laborers were often poverty-stricken, with little money flowing through their lives. As a result, they had to be self-sufficient, generationally establishing a culture of independence, local communalism, and perseverance. Rural missions were thus capable of self-sufficiency.⁵⁸ With this established, it becomes clear why the congregation remained largely unaffected when the Great Depression set in and showed little change in their donations to the diocese.⁵⁹

During the Second World War, two congregants of St. Mary's Redbank received noteworthy recognition for their contributions to America's defeat of the Axis Powers. Frederick Shuster gave his life in the pursuit of victory at the Battle of the Bulge in Luxembourg, while William "Bill" McChesney received a Purple Heart and Distinguished Flying Cross for his efforts, returning to Redbank after the war. McChesney served as an active member of the laity

⁵⁷ Letter to the Rev. Alfric Goldsmith, August 29, 1921, Archives of St. Mary's Redbank Episcopal Church.

⁵⁸ *Convention Journals* 1934, 124.

⁵⁹ Generally, anywhere from two to twelve dollars.

for over sixty years, ensuring St. Mary's survival during the turbulent post-war years in the community. This period arguably saw the mission thrive greater than it ever had since its consecration in the 1870s. From 1935-44, the parish was led by the Reverend Erwin C. Bauder, who worked through Kittanning and established a triune network where he served the St. Mary's Redbank and St. Andrew's Cadogan missions in addition to St. Michael's, Wayne Township parish.⁶⁰ During this nine-year episcopate to the congregants in Redbank, he baptized 56 and confirmed 31. When he resigned in 1944, the church was stronger than ever, both structurally and congregationally.

During the tumultuous post-war years, the diocese was shepherded by a new bishop, Austin Pardue. The Pardue era brought a revised perspective of wealthy suburban parishes as to the "positive hindrance" of rural missions.⁶¹ During the late 1940s, St. Mary's clergy was on the move, with three in place over a span of four years. The first who served for six months in 1945 was Reverend James T. Marshall. He was succeeded by Reverend Wilford Cross from 1945-47, who ceased traveling to St. Mary's because of his resignation from St. Paul's Kittanning. Reverend William McLean, rector of St. Peter's, Butler, acted as a temporary replacement from 1948-49. Around this time, St. Mary's Redbank transitioned to only afternoon services, a trend that remained until the church's closure. The next replacement was Father Raymond Custer, a high school teacher from Tarentum, who served the community until 1953 when he was replaced via request from the vestry.⁶²

In October 1951, a letter came across the desk of Bishop Pardue. The letter was sent as a result of a meeting where the vestry voted five to two to relieve Custer of his shepherdship over

⁶⁰ *St. Mary's Redbank Church*, 4. St. Andrew's Cadogan closed shortly after Fr. Bauder took over as rector due to financial issues.

⁶¹ Bonner, *Called Out of Darkness Into Marvelous Light*, 192.

⁶² *St. Mary's Redbank Church*, 4.

the Redbank flock. He was given command of several rural missions during his episcopate, and after he was relieved, he remained with the others. The letter to Pardue gave reasons as to why they believe he should be removed:

For using the parish house for a public dance hall against the members wishes and for using a nonmember to prepare the altar and other activities and for driving members away by telling them if they did not like the way he done [sic] to stay at home and for failure to try and get any new members to join and various members refusing to pay anything in the church as long as he was Rector and for calling the members a bunch of hypocrites.⁶³

Pardue responded, affirming the seriousness of these accusations.⁶⁴ Custer was relieved of his control over St. Mary's but there was a year lull between his departure and the arrival of a replacement rector. A letter celebrating that the Diocese found another willing clergyman came in September 1952, with Harwood C. Bowman Jr. being appointed to the position. Bowman was willing to do two Sundays a month instead of the once-monthly service held by Custer, which earned him acclaim from the congregation.⁶⁵

Oral History and the Decline of St. Mary's Redbank Church: 1960-2021

In the years following 1960, St. Mary's began to experience a steady decline in membership as many of the next generation moved beyond the Redbank Valley to find work in a changing world.⁶⁶ Since its establishment in 1872, the church had retained a small, yet zealous congregation comprised of blue-collar families who were inextricably tied to the land and

⁶³ Letter to Austin Pardue, October 23, 1951, Archives of St. Mary's Redbank Church.

⁶⁴ Letter to John Stamford, November 13, 1951, Archives of St. Mary's Redbank Church.

⁶⁵ Letter to William C. Billman, September 17, 1952, Archives of St. Mary's Redbank Church.

⁶⁶ Interview with David Downs, June 21, 2024.

industries of the Redbank Valley. When the same industries—chief among them coal mining and the railroad—entered their twilight years, Redbank citizens were forced to consider employment outside of the community. The parishioners at St. Mary’s were not deterred, however, and services continued to occur, if irregularly. Attendee and layman David Downs remembers that “[w]e didn’t have church in the morning, it was either like 2:30 in the afternoon or 7:30 at night.”⁶⁷ He further recalls that during his early childhood in the church, most of the membership came from Kittanning and the “outlying villages” nearby in addition to the Redbank regulars.⁶⁸

From 1955-68, Father William M. Bayle of Kittanning took up the mantle of priest at St. Mary’s. When Bayle relocated to Buffalo, he was succeeded as vicar of St. Mary’s by Father C. Roger Butler, who served the community from 1963-89.⁶⁹ Remembered as “quite the character” by some in the congregation, Butler was a hard worker who often drove over the speed limit to make it to St. Mary’s for his service at 2 p.m. after preaching at nearby Kittanning.⁷⁰ During the years of Butler’s long ministry, St. Mary’s celebrated its centennial on October 15, 1972. On the day of the service, over 100 attendees crammed into the small church building to hear Butler and the choir of St. Paul’s Kittanning.⁷¹ A sizeable portion of this historic turnout had traveled far to reconnect with their families and the friends they made growing up in the village of Redbank, reflecting the importance of the church to the community. Butler gave these remarks:

"For One Hundred years the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached in this place.

Faithful members of the congregation have received the Sacraments which Christ

offers to all His people to strengthen and sustain us in our earthly life. The people

⁶⁷ Interview with David Downs. June 21, 2024.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *St. Mary’s Redbank Church*, 4

⁷⁰ Interview with John Wilson. June 27, 2024.

⁷¹ Ibid.

who have worshipped here together with the Diocese of Pittsburgh have maintained this mission church in order that all who seek God may find Him and be found by Him. In the days when Redbank was a thriving community, St. Mary's Church was the center of its social and spiritual life. Now that only a few people live here the church is still a beacon on the hill overlooking the community showing forth the life and ministry of Jesus Christ not only to the people who live near by but also to the people who come a considerable distance to worship in the church which is dear to their hearts. Bishops of the Diocese of Pittsburgh and priests who have come from neighboring parishes together with strong and dedicated members of St. Mary's have given greatly of their life and treasures to keep this church a living witness to Jesus Christ in this place. Many people who live in distant places still call St. Mary's for spiritual nurture, a minister will be provided here. The past and present are brought together as the living members of this congregation worship in the midst of the cemetery. We who are still in our earthly pilgrimage walk to church through a cemetery in which lie the bodies of "those we have loved long since and lost awhile." Truly, we are reminded each Sunday of how much the church believes in the communion of saints both living and dead. As your priest, it is my prayer that we may continue to serve our Lord lovingly and courageously in this beautiful and peaceful House of God."⁷²

Butler continued to preach in Redbank even after he resigned from his position at St. Paul's, Kittanning in 1975 and became vicar of Holy Innocents Church, Leechburg in 1984. Butler's last service in Redbank was held in 1989, shortly before he left for Watertown, New

⁷² *The Celebration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of St. Mary's Redbank Episcopal Church 1872-1972*, Archives of St Mary's Redbank Church.

York. Butler was temporarily replaced for four years by the “very Anglican, very British Anglican” Father Daniel S. Grubb, who ministered from 1991 to 1995.⁷³ Following Grubb’s departure, management of the church and further services were left in the hands of the loyal laity, who strived to keep the church open against unfavorable odds.

During this time, St. Mary’s once again lacked a permanent priest on staff, relying on visiting priests who volunteered to serve in the community. Through it all, however, laity officers of the church kept the doors open, pews filled, and the building well taken care of. An uptick of membership in the early 1990s saw the church undergo a renovation project in which the exterior was repainted and a new roof was installed to better withstand the elements. Additionally, the church was enabled, for the first time, to meet its financial obligations and had enough funds left over for “additional outreach projects.”⁷⁴ Yet, perhaps the greatest blessing of this period was the reinstatement of a permanent priest at St. Mary’s, Father James E. Bauer, MD. Bauer’s position as director of the Cancer Treatment Center at the Indiana, Pennsylvania Hospital rendered him financially stable enough to pursue a career in rural ministry. Regarded by congregate John Wilson as “one of the nicest priests you could ever ask for,” Butler routinely donated his time and funds to the small church. Among his generous donations were a brand-new organ, the purchase of a new furnace, and the refurbishing of several improvements to the church building which included another exterior paint job in June 1998 and the laying of a new carpet in 1999.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, however, the decline of the church continued to accelerate after the turn of the millennium, with the diocese at last closing its doors in 2021 following the COVID-19 Pandemic. St. Mary’s was ultimately saved from demolition through the intervention of

⁷³ Interview with John Wilson. June 27, 2024.

⁷⁴ *St. Mary’s Redbank Church*, 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

parishioner Jim Shuster, who purchased the building from the Pittsburgh Diocese later that year. The diocese later paid Shuster back in full for the building, which continues to stand as a testament to their charity.

Perhaps the most critical factor in the enduring permanence of St. Mary's Redbank was—and remains—its remarkably dedicated parishioners. David Downs remembers that when they were still in operation, “the trains that go by sometimes would set a fire...it would catch [the] whole hillside on fire,” likely due to a “bad wheel bearing.” Because of the distance between the village of Redbank and any nearby civilization, the response time of local firefighters was understandably poor. Downs recalls that, upon seeing one such blaze threatening to consume the parish, an older female parishioner “brought a bucket of water and a shovel...next to the woods and was going to help put out the fire,” at two or three o'clock in the morning. As the spiritual “focal point” of the Redbank Village, “the only church [Redbank citizens] went to,” St. Mary's meant a great deal to its congregants, making any attempt to preserve it virtually instinctive. In the absence of permanent priests, the actions of the laity became “very, very important” to keeping the church alive, and St. Mary's was blessed to have many such hard workers. In the wake of closure, the faithful of St. Mary's continued to care for the church building where they could.

A Rural Establishment

St. Mary's Redbank is a rural church attended by a rural congregation that embodied rural values. The congregants were self-sufficient and independent, prioritizing their survival over donations to the Diocese. As John Wilson put it, “Times were really tough...you kind of put eating first, and then God. He came after eating after you had a full stomach, and sometimes you

didn't have a full stomach.”⁷⁶ Within a diocese that was comprised primarily of urban parishes, St. Mary's was an odd one out. It was remote, destitute, and, for the most part, required only spiritual sustenance. Additionally, it was a dynastic establishment, which retained a consistent membership for nearly seventy-five years, while urban parishes had congregations that were always fluctuating. With that, St. Mary's remained a low-maintenance mission parish and was neglected by the diocese as a result. Though services were held monthly, the congregants still put their time and effort into the church by maintaining the grounds and holding prayer services when clergy were absent. The laity had to step up to ensure the mission's structural and spiritual integrity. On the other end of the spectrum, the diocese wanted to rid itself of its responsibility to the rural mission network established by Kerfoot to focus on other, more important initiatives. As the diocese ebbed and flowed through different periods of the episcopacy and missions closed under financial and voluminal scrutiny, St. Mary's stoically endured. The church was on the “fringe” of the diocese, and because of its isolated setting, it continually escaped Pittsburgh's attention.⁷⁷ Arguably, the diocese saw St. Mary's as a hindrance, and the only individual who showed any care, besides many of the rectors, was Kerfoot. “They looked at us like an astronomer would view Pluto...and the diocese at Pittsburgh for the Anglicans, viewed us, I think, as another galaxy.”⁷⁸

There are a few themes to glean concerning St. Mary's. The first is how religion in rural zones was viewed. St. Mary's was the religious focal point of the area, though it was not because it was specifically Episcopalian, but instead a house of worship.⁷⁹ Downs attests that he had to

⁷⁶ Interview with John Wilson. June 27, 2024.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Interview with David Downs. June 21, 2024.

explain to many of his neighbors and friends what an “Episcopalian” was.⁸⁰ Inhabitants of hamlets like Redbank across rural America were not picky about the affiliation of the place(s) in which place they worshipped, unlike urban folks who had a slew of options to choose from. St. Mary’s was more of a spiritual and social haven rather than a purely Episcopal one because of its spatial context.

Another aspect was the importance of the laity in maintaining the mission. Testimonials confess that if it were not for the dedication of the laymen, St. Mary’s would have closed much earlier and likely been demolished. The best case of this was the story of Bill McChesney, who, when hearing about the potential closing of St. Mary’s by the diocese, drove down to Pittsburgh and slammed his fist on the bishop’s desk, demanding the church remain open.⁸¹ St. Mary’s historically lacked a permanent clergy, meaning the congregation knew they were seen as deviants from the diocese and other parishes, such as St. Paul’s Kittanning.⁸² Nevertheless, the congregants boldly set about maintaining their mission without the help of the diocese. This theme remained consistent from its establishment in 1872 to its closure in 2021.

The final aspect was the ideological clash between the diocese and St. Mary’s. The diocese, which operated on a centralized, urbanist ethos, built its ministry on increasing outreach and influence within its area by competing with other churches. For Pittsburgh, they were underdogs behind the Presbyterians and Catholics and spent the majority of their history trying to overcome their situation. St. Mary’s was never concerned with winning over the heart of the Steel City to the Episcopal Church. Instead, it was chiefly concerned with the survival of its community. The diocese saw St. Mary’s as an unimportant cog in an oversized and underfunded

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Interview with John Wilson. June 27, 2024.

⁸² Ibid.

machine, attempting to rid itself of them on multiple occasions. The conservative culture of Redbank built upon sustainability proved a nuisance to the diocese that constantly desired improvement.