

The History of St. Agnes' Church in Cowan, Tennessee

By L. Jarod Pearson



The Missionary Work of St. Mark's Guild - 1877

The first effort to organize an Episcopal congregation in Cowan, Tennessee originated with St. Mark's Guild, a missionary organization on Sewanee Mountain. St. Mark's Guild was founded in the Year 1869 by a Dr. Knight and had three main purposes: missionary work in the surrounding area, religious advancement, and improvement of the moral tone.

An article written in 1877 mentions that "three missions are in the charge of St. Mark's Guild, who intend as soon as possible to extend operations to Cowan, Moffat, and Lost Cove." Indeed, a congregation was organized in Lost Cove and services were held in Moffat (later renamed Monteagle) some years later at the Fairmont School, but there is no indication that St. Mark's came into Cowan to organize a mission. Their vision, however, certainly planted a seed for later efforts.

Otey Memorial Parish and the "Blessed Ministrations" of St. Mary's Convent - 1894

Cowan was scarcely mentioned again as a mission plant until the Year 1894 when the Rev'd A.A. Benton wrote the following entry for the church parochial report:

"The efforts to open a mission at Cowan have so far not proved successful. The three communicants there are included in the report of the Otey Memorial Parish. But two sisters of the St. Mary's Sisterhood have given blessed ministrations and have laid the foundation for a future successful mission there." (Parochial Reports, Journal of the Diocese of Tennessee, 1894, p. 89)

The very next year, 1895, Cowan was listed for the first time as a mission station. The church parochial report lists a congregation of six communicants under the leadership of the Rev'd C.S. Bassett. The congregation met in a house on the north bank of Boiling Fork Creek about two blocks east of the present church building. Fr. Bassett returned to his native England soon after the church was organized.

The next year's parochial report, 1896, lists the congregation as "St. Mary's". It is unclear whether that was the name of the church or if it simply meant that the church was still under the care of St. Mary's Convent.

St. Saviour's Mission - 1897

In 1897, the *Journal of the Diocese of Tennessee* lists a congregation of 11 communicants in Cowan given the name St. Saviour's Mission. St. Saviour's also listed a church school with 2 teachers and 25 scholars. The Rev'd R.H. Starr was serving as Priest-in-Charge.

On September 22, 1898, Bishop Gailor made his first ever episcopal visit to Cowan. His journal entry says that he spent the morning at Trinity Church, Winchester, and arrived in Cowan at 12 noon. That afternoon, he baptized a child in the house used for church services and then baptized a man at Boiling Fork Creek. That night, at 8:00 p.m., he held a service using the building of the [Christian Church](#) and confirmed 16 people. Bishop Gailor stated that "the work at this mission is growing rapidly and we hope to soon have our own church building."

The Search for a Building - 1899

Stirling Claiborne, the appointed Lay Reader, wrote about St. Saviour's being "a very small congregation worshipping in an old, dilapidated, two-room house on the side of a hill, which threatened to fall down without a moment's notice." He also wrote, "I shall never forget the uneasiness we all felt when the building was filled with people."

In his determination, Claiborne found an abandoned chapel in the Shiloh community near Murfreesboro, Tennessee Church that was previously occupied by Church of the Ascension. The chapel was disassembled, loaded onto a train, and delivered to Cowan where it was reconstructed on a lot near the railroad donated by the Finchum family. The cost for moving the building by railroad was paid by the St. Agnes' Sisterhood of Trinity Church Wall Street in New York City.

St. Agnes' Mission - 1899

On May 3, 1899, at 3:30 p.m., Bishop Thomas Frank Gailor laid the cornerstone for St. Agnes' Church in the newly reconstructed chapel. The congregation was renamed to honor the St. Agnes' Sisterhood for their help in transporting the building from Murfreesboro.

Shortly after the church was relocated and renamed, Stirling Claiborne was ordained into the priesthood and appointed as Priest-in-Charge. Two years later he acquired two storage barns from a neighbor down the street, brought them over to the St. Agnes' campus, and combined them into a school building. A parochial school operated there from 1901 until 1918.

When the parochial school closed the building was used for Sunday school classes and, for a brief period, as a vicary (priest residence). Also, for a brief period, the building was rented out as a private residence.

The First Hundred Years

Very little changed at St. Agnes' for the first five decades of the Twentieth Century, but the congregation was relatively stable with about 35 active parishioners.

In 1955, a dynamic team of Sewanee seminarians – Mr. Jim George and Mr. Harry Allen – came to St. Agnes' for field education work and built the congregation to its highest level of participation. There were in this timeframe more than 100 parishioners, about 75 Sunday school pupils, and two Sunday services just to accommodate the crowd. In response to the dramatic growth, the Diocese of Tennessee upgraded St. Agnes' from a mission station to an organized “three-point” mission.

When Mr. George and Mr. Allen completed their programs at Sewanee the congregation returned to previous membership levels, and then declined as the cultural uproar of the 1960's took its toll on the community. The church Sunday school closed and participation dwindled.

The Rev. Phillip Werlein, a retired priest from the Diocese of Louisiana, took the helm at St. Agnes' in 1966 and helped the church grow again. The Sunday school program was reactivated, a youth program was organized, and a church bus was acquired.

Fr. Werlein also led the first remodel and upgrade in the church's history. Both buildings received electrical updates, lighting improvements, and central heating and air conditioning. A modern kitchen was installed in the parish hall with funds raised from the annual fish fry, which turned into the largest block party in Cowan history.



Cowan entered a long period of economic decline in the 1980's that took a huge toll on businesses and churches alike. The losses at St. Agnes' were immense as attendance dropped to single digit numbers in a very short timeframe. At one point in the '80's decade there was a lapse in Sunday services, and some Cowan residents assumed that the church had closed.

Weekly services resumed under the leadership of The Rev'd Frank Sanders, a Cowan resident and an Episcopal deacon. Under Fr. Sanders the church initiated new outreach projects and new directional signage. St. Agnes' continued into the decade of the 1990's with a small and dedicated membership base.

Revitalization in the 21st Century

St. Agnes' received a sizable and unexpected bequest from the Haynes Estate in 2003. A portion of the funds were used to perform the largest remodel and upgrade project in the entire history of the church.

The congregation also shifted to a sustainable ministry model that uses a highly trained team of lay leaders and a part-time, retired priest. St. Agnes' also returned to an older and more traditional Rite One service liturgy and restarted the seasonal Sunday school program.

The congregation is small by any standard, but growing noticeably. The number of active parishioners grew from 5 in the Year 2004 to 32 in the year 2014. The continuing growth led the church's leadership to acquire an adjacent empty lot to serve as a parking lot and green space.

St. Agnes' looks to an encouraging future as the congregation builds on a beautiful history.



*Most of the information contained in this article were obtained from the memoirs of The Rev'd Phillip Werlein during his years as Priest-in-Charge at St. Agnes' (1966-1978). Other pieces of information were obtained by Mrs. Martha Rogers during her years as a seminarian at Sewanee's School of Theology.