

St. Andrew's Church in New Kensington holds final service for its faithful

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Parishioners listen to Episcopal Bishop Dorsey W.M. McConnell during a final service at St. Andrew's Church in New Kensington on Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020.



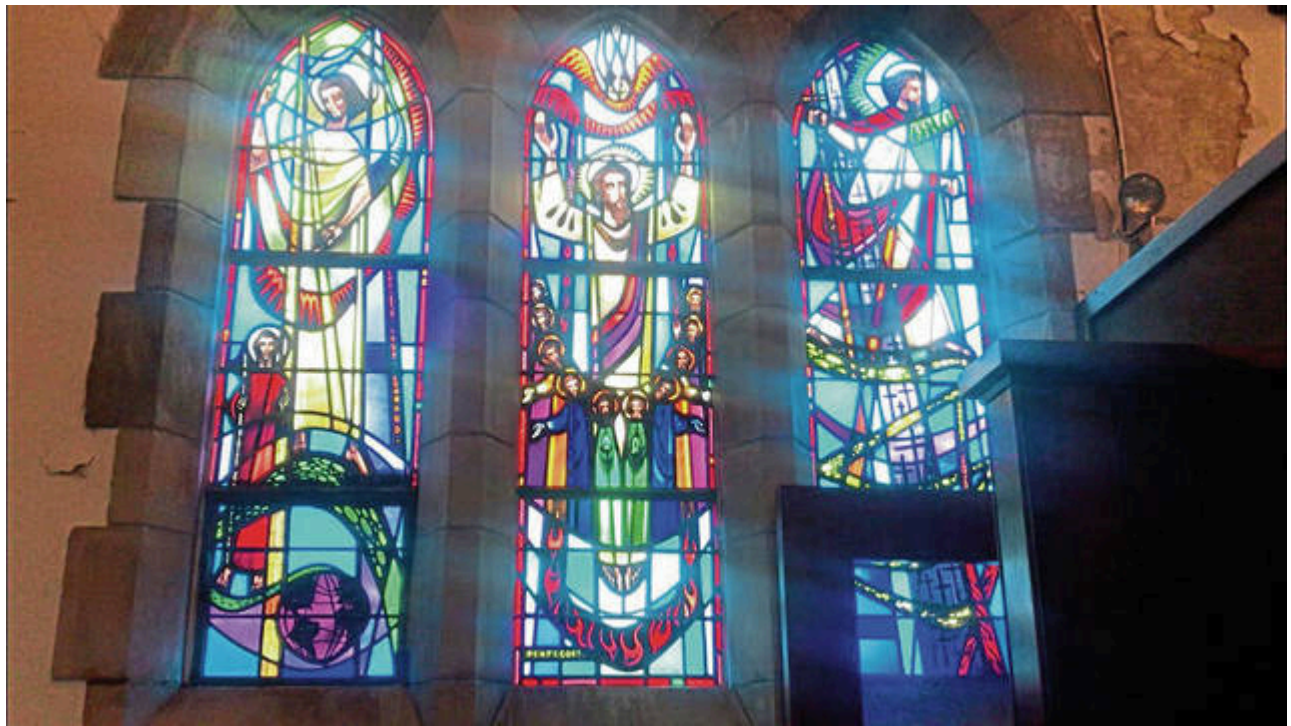
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Parishioners pray one last time during a final service inside St. Andrew's Church in New Kensington on Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020.



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St. Andrew's Church in New Kensington on Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020.



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One of the stain glass windows of St. Andrew's Church in New Kensington, as seen on Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020.



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This photo was taken at the first church service of St. Andrew's Church in New Kensington in April, 1952.

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St. Andrew's Church in New Kensington has sat empty for seven years. On Thursday, roughly 30 parishioners filled the pews one last time.

Together they prayed, received Communion, and listened as Episcopal Bishop Dorsey W.M. McConnell deconsecrated the 71-year-old building, which is in the process of being sold.

"This is a hard thing to do under any circumstances," McConnell said.

The church, part of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, has been without an active congregation for several years.

It was last used by a congregation of the Anglican Church in North America, which moved out of the building in 2013. The original St. Andrew's congregation was among the 42 parishes that left the Pittsburgh Episcopal Diocese in 2008 to join the Anglicans.

The diocese attempted to restart a parish at the church after the Anglican congregation left, but it was unsuccessful, the Rev. Canon Kimberly Karashin said. She said congregations that looked at the church told the diocese it was too big and would be too expensive to maintain.

"As communities change in some places, it just doesn't become feasible to keep congregations going and doors open," Karashin said. "We tried to make a go of it, but it just didn't work out."

Whenever an Episcopal church is no longer going to be used as a place of worship, the diocese holds a final service and reads a declaration that returns the space to secular use.

McConnell equated the loss of the church to a death in one's family.

"It feels to me that whenever I do something like this that a part of my own body is just being taken away," he said.

But, he added, the legacy of the people who worshipped there will live on.

"The grace and faith that was planted here will continue because God does not stop doing what God starts," he said. "That spirit and that aura or presence of the saints and of the faith of the saints will remain long after the hymns have stopped being sung in this place."

Parishioner Larry Dupain has mixed emotions about the church closure. He spent 30 years worshipping there, but also understands the diocese's position.

He now worships at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Brackenridge.

"We had a very vibrant congregation that I was blessed to belong to, but there was no way we could keep it going with such a few people. It was a drain on the diocese," Dupain said. "It's just sitting here. It's going to deteriorate over time. I'm glad that it could be put to some practical use."

Parishioner Kathy Dunmore lives in Dayton, Ohio, but grew up in the church. Her mother and father are from the Alle-Kiski Valley and were married there.

Dunmore and her siblings were all baptized there. Her family members donated money to install some of the church's stained glass windows and hand-sewed and embroidered some of the altar linens. During Sunday services, her entire family would be there.

"It's killing me," Kathy Dunmore said through tears.

Karashin said the closure and sale of the church is sad, and not something the diocese likes to see happen.

Its cornerstone was laid in December 1948, and the first service in the main worship space took place in April 1952. During that service, Bishop Austin Pardue dedicated the space as a place of worship.

"We want the buildings to still be used as a place of Christian worship if at all possible," Karashin said.

Karashin declined to discuss specifics of the sale and the property's intended future use due to the fact the sale hasn't been finalized.

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