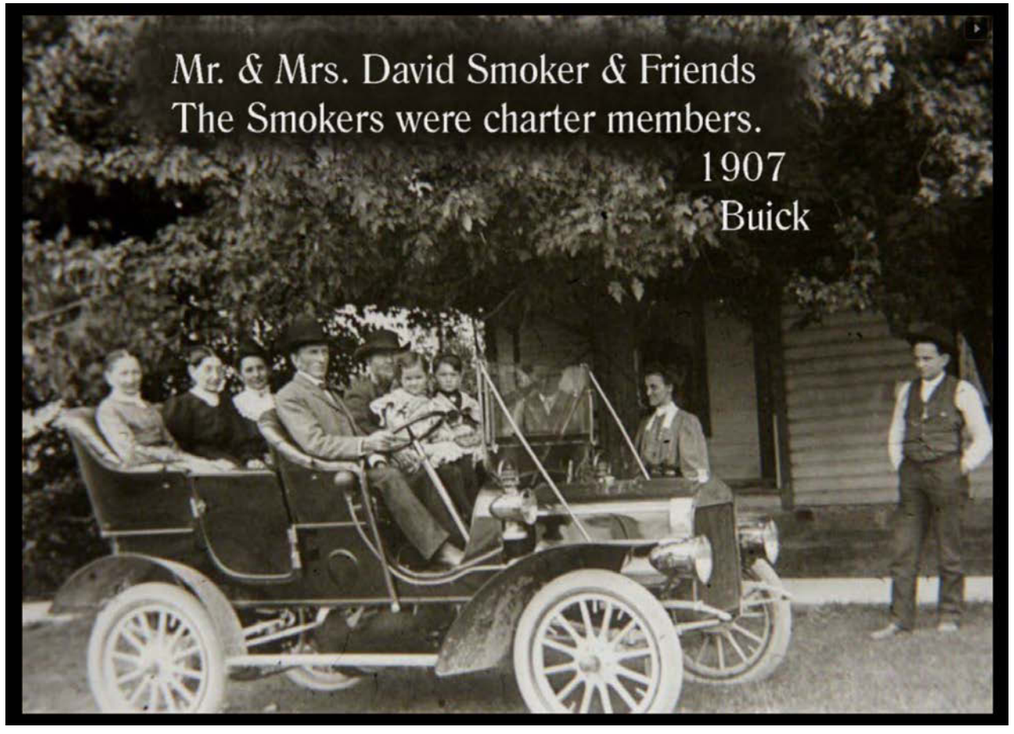
1913 - 1919: a congregation forms



- Founded in 1913 by about 20 members, the church began worship in a remodeled house on South Fifth Street, quickly organizing Sunday School, Ladies Aid (women-led service and support), Christian Endeavor (youth leadership and service), and mission giving.

- Through evangelistic meetings and steady outreach, membership grew to 76 in 1918, even as the young congregation navigated frequent pastoral transitions, with five pastors serving during its first seven years.

- Early conflicts around leadership, discipline, and governance led to the adoption of a constitution and clearer membership practices.

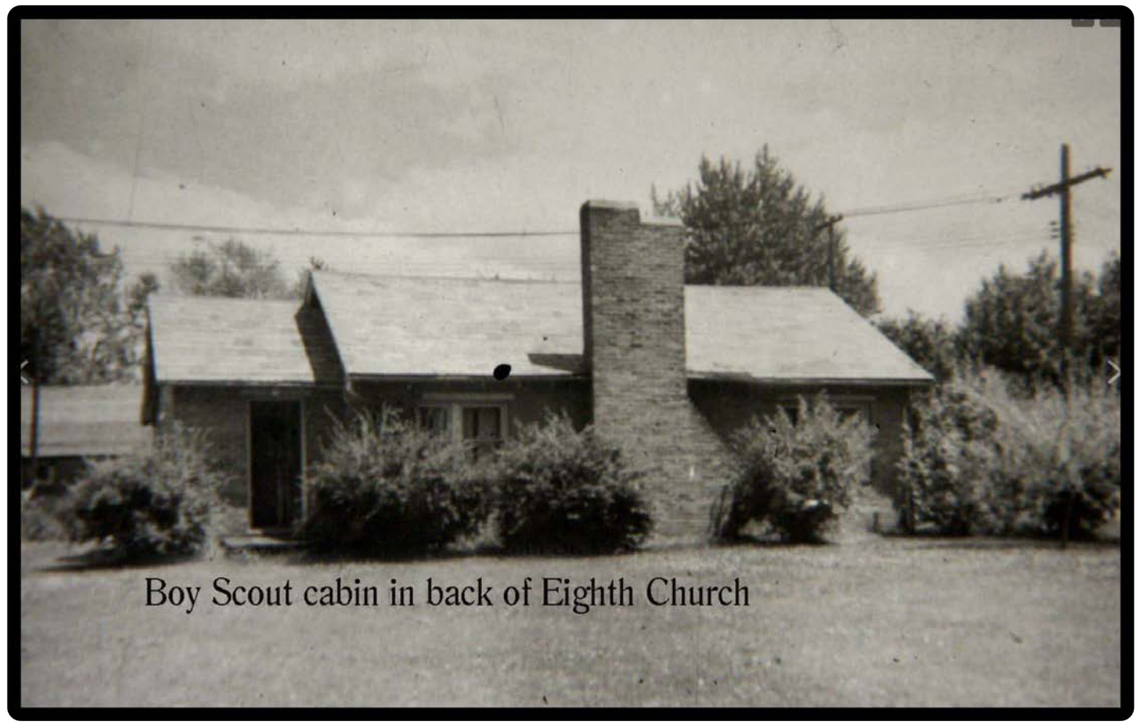
1920s: building in town

- In 1920, the congregation built a new Gothic Revival-style brick church at Eighth and Purl Streets, a visible departure from traditional Mennonite meetinghouse design.

- Pastoral transitions, financial pressure, and shifting Mennonite affiliations shaped a decade of adjustment and reorganization.

- During a period of upheaval within the Old Mennonite Conference and at Goshen College in the early 1920s, a significant number of individuals and families, including Pastor Irvin R. Detweiler, transferred from College Mennonite Church and other congregations to Eighth Street. Membership grew to approximately 120 during this period. Detweiler served as Eighth Street's pastor from 1923–1930.

1930s: faithful through the Depression



- During the Great Depression, the church became a center for community relief, hosting canning projects, benefit meals, and mission support.
- Youth groups, choirs, Scouts, and Christian Endeavor remained active, sustaining congregational life even when finances were tight.
- Under Pastor Grover Soldner (1931–1937), the congregation emphasized mutual aid and faithfulness in difficult times.

1940s: peace and conscience during war

- World War II brought profound moral and pastoral challenges as the congregation affirmed Mennonite commitments to peace and nonresistance, including sending a peace statement to President Franklin Roosevelt.

- Members faced deeply personal decisions shaped by faith, conscience, and circumstance. Some pursued conscientious objection or alternative service, while others entered military service. The congregation sustained worship and community life across these differences.

- After the war, attention turned toward reconciliation, rebuilding, and renewed engagement with mission and service. Eighth Street assisted in Camp Friedenswald’s founding in 1949.

1950s: expansion and outward momentum

- During Robert Hartzler’s pastorate (1945 - 1962), and with nearly 400 members, the church built an educational wing, expanding Sunday School, youth, and midweek ministries. A dedication service was held on October 13, 1957, with costs to date totaling $175,000.

- This period marked one of the congregation’s most active eras, with strong participation across age groups. Mission weekends, PAX stories, camps, and service initiatives connected the congregation beyond Goshen.

- Members recognized emerging needs beyond the church and brought imagination and persistence to creating responses. Their leadership helped launch and sustain institutions that continue to serve the wider community, including Greencroft, Oaklawn, and Camp Friedenswald.

1960s: responding to a changing world

- The civil rights movement and the Vietnam War shaped congregational life, prompting sustained engagement with Mennonite peace commitments, public witness, and differing convictions about protest, patriotism, and conscience.

- Worship, music, governance, and youth programming shifted as generational expectations and wider social currents influenced congregational life.

- Membership gradually declined as Vietnam-era peace witness and changing expectations of church participation led some members to disengage or move on.

1970s: reflection and reorientation

- Led by Pastor Paul Goering (1969 - 1978), the congregation undertook formal self-studies, leadership retreats, and financial review as a way of clarifying identity and strengthening shared life.

- The Eighth Street Preschool was founded in 1973, extending the church’s commitment to children, families, and early childhood education into the community.

- Questions of authority, faith formation, and public witness were approached through shared discernment, emphasizing care and openness rather than rigidity as the congregation reflected on its mission and long-term sustainability.

1980s: strain and resilience

- The 1980s were marked by a breach of trust in pastoral leadership that brought grief, uncertainty, and the departure of some members.
- Those who remained sustained worship, care, shared life, and children’s ministries during a difficult season.
- Through steady commitment and mutual support, congregational life continued.

1990s: shared leadership and rebuilding trust

- The congregation called Myron Schrag (1992 - 2002) as pastor, entering a period of steadier congregational life and gradual growth in participation.

- Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau (1994 -) joined the staff as a half-time associate pastor, marking a shift to shared leadership and expanding ministry with youth, Christian education, worship, and care.

- The congregation strengthened its outward engagement through ministries such as Interfaith Hospitality Network. A 1997 master plan and $420,000 fundraising effort prepared the way for future facility improvements.

2000s: renewing building and partnerships

- A major building renewal, “Carrying on the Vision,” updated core systems and shared spaces. The work included a renovated sanctuary in 2001 incorporating a pipe organ and grand piano, followed by kitchen upgrades in 2005.

- During Pastor Kevin Farmwald’s tenure (2003–2014), the congregation entered a long-term partnership with Jubilee Mennonite Church in Mississippi, supporting post-Katrina hurricane recovery through annual service trips.

- Congregational life remained steady in worship, education, and service, sustaining established ministries while giving increased attention to spiritual direction.

2010s: reflection and expanding witness

EIGHTH STREET MENNONITE CHURCH

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION | 1913-2013

- Marking its 100th year, the congregation engaged in a year-long centennial reflection under the theme *A Body That Lives*. Essays, storytelling, and community events invited remembrance, gratitude, and renewed attention to the church's enduring faith and values.

- The decade included a pastoral transition that shaped a new chapter in congregational leadership and life.

- Pastor Julia Gingrich was hired in 2015, joining Brenda and lay leaders in guiding sustained reflection and action around reparative justice and public witness, work that continues into the present. This season has engaged questions of racism, patriarchy, Indigenous histories, creation care, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and how faith is lived in the wider world.

2020s: pandemic and deepening participation

- As the church building marked its 100th year, a new vision statement named welcome and belonging as central to the life of this community of around 200 members.

- In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic paused in-person worship. Eighth Street gathered online and later outdoors before returning to indoor worship in late 2022.

- Amid ongoing national uncertainty, the congregation continues to express its Anabaptist values through public witness and solidarity with vulnerable neighbors. This includes a more intentional focus on accessibility, as the congregation examines how barriers have functioned in the past and how fuller participation might be supported going forward.