

First Mennonite Church of Newton, Kansas

*A Congregation of
Mission and Memory
1878 – 2018*

With a vision of:
Being rooted deeply
Reaching widely
Loving well

Let's use a time machine to get familiar with
the short version of the 140 year old story of
First Mennonite Church (FMC) in Newton, KS.

Heubuden's Mennonite Church (near today's Gdansk, Poland) is founded by Dutch migrants. FMC's founding families emigrate from Heubuden to Kansas



The founding of Newton's original Mennonite church is a story of migrants. It begins in about 1540 when Mennonite emigrants from the Netherlands settle in Prussia, a prominent German state. The Mennonites establish homes and a church. Their village is called Heubuden (which means “hay loft” and today is called Stogi). It is near Marienburg (today's name is Malbork) and is about thirty miles southeast of today's Gdansk, Poland.

By the 1670s, the church's youth read German better than Dutch. During 1750-1760, German hymn books are introduced and preaching begins in German. After using Dutch in church services for approximately 230 years, the congregation discontinues using the Dutch language in about 1770.

By 1744, the congregation is so large *“they have preaching at two places on Sunday.”* In spite of size fluctuations over the years, the Heubuden church becomes the largest rural congregation of East Germany when it reaches a high of 1,831 in 1774. By 1945, the congregation ceases to exist.

Heubuden Faces Congregational Declines



Interior of Heubuden Church building.

In 1788, seventeen families leave the Heubuden congregation and immigrate to Russia (the Ukraine). No record is kept of further emigrations. However, during the 1800s the congregation makes frequent contributions for immigrants to Russia.

Nationalistic, militaristic, economic, and religious issues are at the forefront of life in Europe during the 1850s to the 1890s. As a result, 55 families and 29 individuals (over 300 people) from a church of 1,300 leave the Heubuden congregation and migrate from West Prussia to the United States.

These 300+ Mennonites from Heubuden form a small group, distinct from other Mennonites who make their home on the Great Plains in the 1870s. Between 1876 and 1892, those from Heubuden settle in two places – Kansas and Nebraska. They are among the early members of the Zion Church in Elbing (KS), the Emmaus Church near Whitewater (KS), First Mennonite in Newton (KS) and the Mennonite church near Beatrice, Nebraska.

Migrants Find Kansas Prairie – From Horizon to Horizon



Journeying across the Atlantic Ocean, the West Prussian Mennonites leave behind the known and familiar surroundings of the Vistula River delta in today's Poland. In spite of being a low-lying region prone to severe and persistent flooding due to rain, snow melt and ice jams, the Vistula delta is heavily populated.

The year is 1877 when the Heubuden migrants arrive in Harvey County. They experience swaying and rippling prairie grasses – grasses so tall they often stand above the height of a wagon wheel. In what will become Harvey County, the inquisitive learn the earliest homesteads of Euro-Americans were established in 1869.

Contrary to the propaganda of the day, these pioneers are not moving into “empty lands.” The central and western plains of Kansas are occupied by Native Plains Indians – the Wichita, Kansa (Kaw), Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. The lands west of the Missouri River are to be “*permanent Indian preserves*.” However, the government treaties are short-lived. Native Americans are pushed out.

A post-Civil War boom in the region results from land grants and the building of new railroads. This brings in thousands of settlers who claim land under the Homestead Act. As a result, the Heubuden Mennonites find themselves in a land of transition and flux.

Newton – Santa Fe tracks and Main Street. Looking north during Summer of 1871.



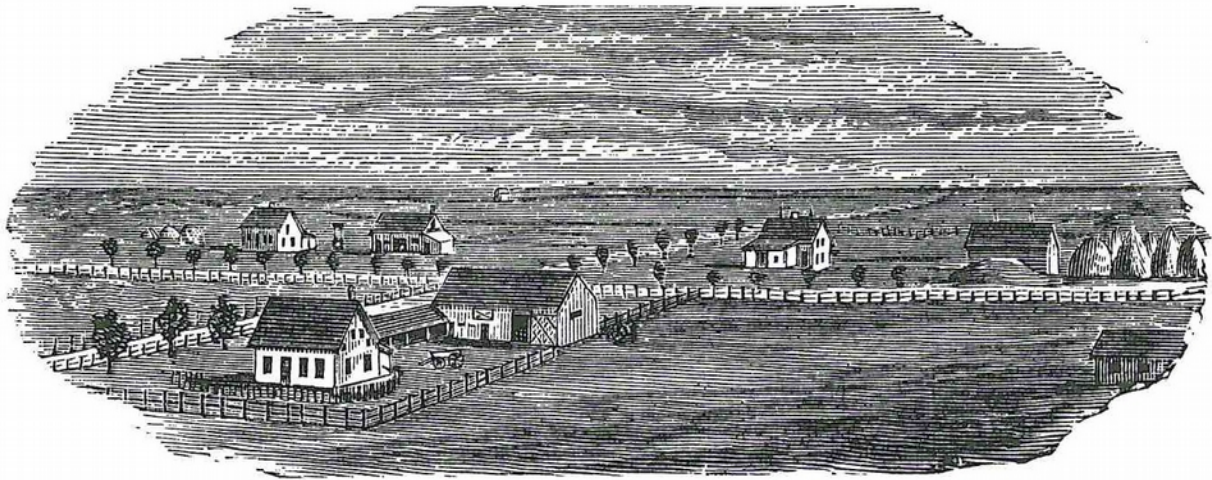
From the large group of Heubuden Church migrants, a portion of the West Prussians settle close to Newton during 1877. The ocean of grasses stretches to the horizon with little to provide a break in the landscape except the Santa Fe railway tracks running east and west.

Newton is only six years old. The brand new boom town has a population of barely 2,000. Newton is a mere five years removed from the *“wild, wooly, and wicked”* days of being a cowtown on the Chisholm Trail.

The Homestead Act of 1862 allows anyone to file “first papers,” pay a \$10 fee and claim 160 acres of public land for free – providing they live on it for five years and start to grow crops. The alternative is to buy land within railroad grant areas. No strings are attached but its sale price is as much as \$10 per acre (\$239 in 2018 dollars).

Harvey County's growth is notable following the 1870 founding of Sedgwick and the 1871 founding of Newton. Burrton is laid out in 1873. Walton's plat is filed in 1876. Halstead is incorporated in 1877; but Hesston will not be founded until 1886. The surge in population is a mixed bag since Harvey County can count at least seventeen vanished towns and settlements between 1871 and the 20th century.

1877 – Goldschaar, settlement of Newton's Prussian Mennonites. Site of their first worship services.



A portion of the Heubuden Mennonites put down roots just east of Newton. Becoming known as Goldschaar (or *golden plowshare* in English), the heart of the settlement has a European style cluster of homes. They belong to the Hermann Sudermann, Sr. family; the Hermann Sudermann, Jr. family; and the Wilhelm Quiring family.

By the end of the 1870s, Newton is a quiet railroad and business center for the surrounding farm area. Some amount of the Mennonites settle in town where they find work or open their own businesses.

Home of Hermann Sudermann, Sr. family in about 1894.
Site where Newton area Mennonites hold their first
worship services in 1877.



Since there is *“no German sermon in the whole city”* the group of Mennonite immigrants have a high priority for establishing a site for worship services. Within their group, the family of Hermann Sudermann Sr. sees a need and meets the need when they make their home available for Sunday services.

By meeting at Goldschaar, Mennonites of Newton and nearby rural areas are able to have church services. However, the fledgling church has incomplete leadership. It has ministers but no elder.

The preaching responsibilities can be rotated between the ministers and an elder. However, only an elder can baptize, serve communion or teach catechism.

1878 – Earliest Mennonite services in Newton are on Sunday afternoons in the rented Baptist church on West 5th Street.



With an 1878 influx of more Mennonite immigrants, the group needs a bigger meeting space. They formally organize, decide to hold services within Newton, and rent the Baptist church building in the 200 block of West 5th Street. Doing so means Sunday afternoon worship since the Baptists have their service in the morning.

The Newton Mennonite church's problem of no resident elder is solved by two existing area Mennonite churches – one in Halstead plus the Emmaus Church near Whitewater. These two churches see a need and meet the need by having their elders serve as visiting elders for the Newton group. Between the Emmaus elder Leonhard Sudermann, the Halstead elder Christian Krehbiel Sr. and the Newton ministers, the Newton church is fully functional.

And then fast forwarding to the 21st century. First Mennonite sees a need and meets the need by sharing its church facilities. Casa Betania, an active group of Hispanic Anabaptist Christians meets at First Mennonite in Newton on Sunday afternoons.

1881 – Newton Mennonites dedicate their new church, a modest wooden structure, at E. 1st and Muse streets.



Using our time machine, we go back to the late 1870s...

The Newton congregation experiences growth as Mennonites continue to emigrate from Europe. Not only does the membership increase but the cultural and ethnic elements of the group are broadened as the new members who join the Newton church are Mennonites of South Russian (Ukrainian) and Swiss-South German backgrounds plus there are some of non-Mennonite background.

The congregation procures land on the very southeast edge of Newton at East First and Muse streets. They construct their own building and dedicate it in 1881.

FMC plays a role in the founding of Bethel College. In October of 1888, Minister Jacob R. Toews of FMC gives the welcoming address at the cornerstone laying of Bethel College's Administration Building. That evening, Bethel's first corporation meeting is held at First Mennonite Church. J.J. Krehbiel, Bethel College co-founder and member of FMC, is elected president of the Bethel Board.

Some "Fast Facts" show the 1880s and 1890s are a beehive of activity at First Mennonite of Newton.

Fast Facts from FMC's early years – 1st half of 1880s

1881 –

- Abraham Quiring starts children's Sunday school.
- Congregation joins Kansas Mennonite Conference (later Western District Conference) and the General Conference of Mennonites.

1880-1886 – Congregation is impacted by the “Great Trek” to Central Asia under the leadership of Claas Epp, Jr.

- South Russian (Ukrainian) Mennonites are impacted by persecution due to government restrictions and policies. Many Mennonites emigrate to America, including the ones who help begin the Newton congregation. About 600 migrants go east to Central Asia in 1880 due to their extreme belief in millennialism (as based on Rev 12:14) and because of expectations for the second coming of Christ.
- The group encounters severe hardships on account of harsh climate and geography. There are numerous deaths. In 1884, 20 families (about 100 persons) break with Epp under the leadership of the ordained ministers (including Jacob Toevs) and decide to go to America.
- The 20 families are supported by two “aid committees”--one in Beatrice and the other in Newton. Peter Claassen and Bernhard Regier, Sr. are members of the Newton committee. The families from Central Asia, including the Jacob Toevs family, arrive in America during 1884 and 1885. The Toevs family and at least six other families who went through the Central Asia experience come to Newton and join the church.
- In 1886, Leonhard Sudermann asks the Newton church to relieve him of his duties by electing an elder. With five candidates on the ballot, the choice falls on Jacob Toevs.

Fast Facts from FMC's early years – Mid 1880s to 1910s

1886 – Sunday school is formally organized, including adult classes.

1887 – The church splits over the issue of membership in secret societies. The result for the larger congregation at East First and Muse is to:

- Officially adopt the name “First Mennonite Church” as a way to distinguish itself from the new and smaller congregation which splits away (and eventually vanishes).
- Begin work on a comprehensive church constitution for First Mennonite.

1888 – First choir at FMC organizes.

1889 – Start of church school emphasizing German and religion. In its early phases, the school operates for several months each year in two sections, city and country. Eventually, the school becomes vacation Bible school, with the city-country division lasting until 1965.

1890 – Start of youth group activities at FMC.

1897 – Congregational growth results in the church building being expanded.

1900 – FMC's first missionaries, Jacob and Nettie Epp, go to Oklahoma and Arizona to work in outreach among Native Americans.

1902 – A building addition is completed, enlarging the sanctuary and Sunday school area.

1909 – Congregation's first overseas missionaries join the General Conference mission in India.

After an 1897 expansion, a building addition in 1902 enlarges the sanctuary and Sunday School space.



As the congregation continues to grow, the building is expanded in 1897. When membership tops 200, an addition is completed in 1902 which enlarges the sanctuary and Sunday School space.

Notice the double front entrances. The tradition of men and women sitting separately in worship services originated in Europe and continues for about 65 years in the Newton congregation. The east entrance (left side) is for the women who sit on that side of the sanctuary. The west entrance is for the men since they sit on the right side. In the men's entry hall, there is a metal box for offerings. No offering plates are passed during the service.

One exception to the seating pattern is the S.S. Haury family. Members from 1895 to 1913, they always sit together. The traditional seating arrangement gradually changes and ends in the mid-1940s when the new elder, Daniel J. Unruh, says he prefers to see families sitting together.

Deaconess Sisterhood movement among American Mennonite Christians has origins in Kansas



1908 – Ordination of the first Bethel Deaconess sisters.

Left to right:

Sister Catherine Voth

Sister Ida Epp

Sister Frieda Kaufman

FMC has long standing ties to the Deaconess Sisterhood – a movement which is a story all by itself. In a nutshell, Mennonite deaconesses originate in the United States through the efforts of David Goerz, a co-founder of Bethel College. The Sisterhood is viewed as a branch of home ministries.

Deaconess sisters are administrators, instructors, nurses, clerks, supervisors, secretaries, lab technicians, housekeepers, cooks, dietitians, and laundry workers.

A deaconess program and motherhouse is established during 1908 in Newton. The Bethel Deaconess Hospital is built. A school of nursing is affiliated with the hospital.

Other Mennonite deaconess hospitals are in American Falls, Idaho (founded in 1909); Beatrice, Nebraska (dedicated in 1911); Mountain Lake, Minnesota (affiliated in 1911); Salem, Oregon (founded in 1917); Hillsboro, Kansas (founded in 1918); and, Bluffton, Ohio (formed in 1920).

1908 – Bethel Deaconess Home & Hospital Society establishes the deaconess program and motherhouse, a hospital, and a school of nursing



Courtesy of Newton Medical Center

Building on the left is Deaconess Home (built in 1910).

Larger building on the right is Bethel Deaconess Hospital.

The founding of the Bethel Deaconess Home and Hospital Society is in 1908. The Society establishes the deaconess program and motherhouse, a hospital, and a school of nursing. During the eighty years of existence of the Bethel Deaconess Hospital, all three administrators – Sister Frieda Kaufman, Herman J. Andres, and Marvin Ewert – as well as 25 deaconesses are members of First Mennonite Church in Newton.

The legacy of the Bethel Deaconess Home and Hospital Society lives on through:

- The Society's nursing program which evolves into the nursing program at Bethel College in North Newton.
- The Society's opening in 1926 of the Bethel Home For The Aged is the forerunner for the Kidron Bethel retirement community in North Newton.
- Through a merger between Newton's two hospitals, Axtell and Bethel Deaconess, the Newton Medical Center is formed.

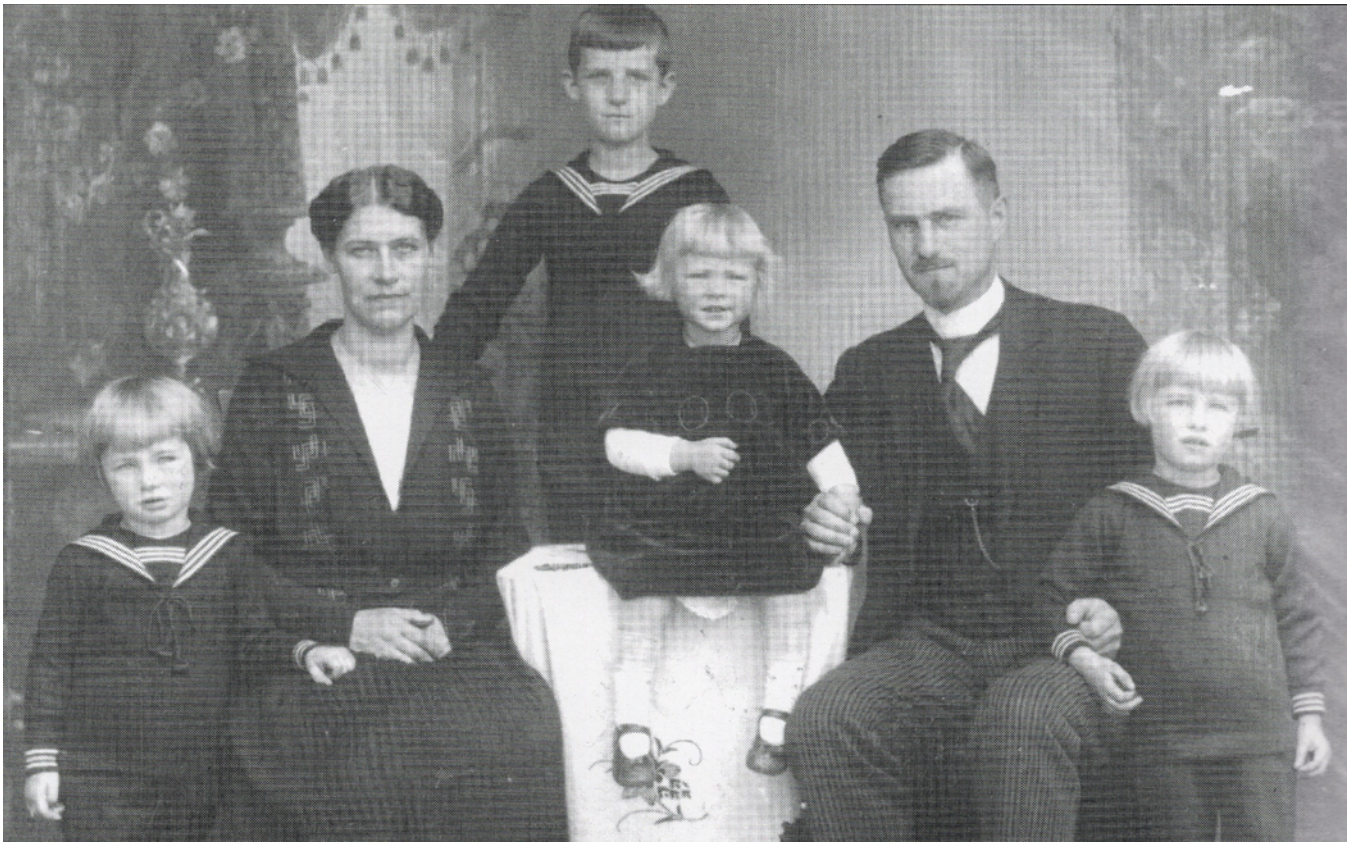
Deaconess Sisterhood “Sees A Need and Meets The Need” in the community and at First Mennonite Church



The “Bethel sisters” have a focus for See A Need, Meet The Need. In addition to serving the community, the 26 deaconesses who are members of First Mennonite Church share their talents within the congregation.

- The first girls' Bible class at FMC is organized and taught for many years by Sister Hillegonda van der Smissen.
- Sister Lena Mae Smith is a leading teacher in the adult Sunday school at FMC.
- Sister Frieda Kaufman is a leader at FMC. Also, she is the administrator of the Bethel hospital for thirty years, 1908 – 1938. Sister Frieda teaches the first Sunday school teacher training classes at First Mennonite Church; serves on FMC's building committee for the present sanctuary and tower; makes many design decisions; and advocates for installing stained glass windows as “reverential necessity.”

Atrocities of Russia's Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 cause refugees. They increase membership rolls at FMC.

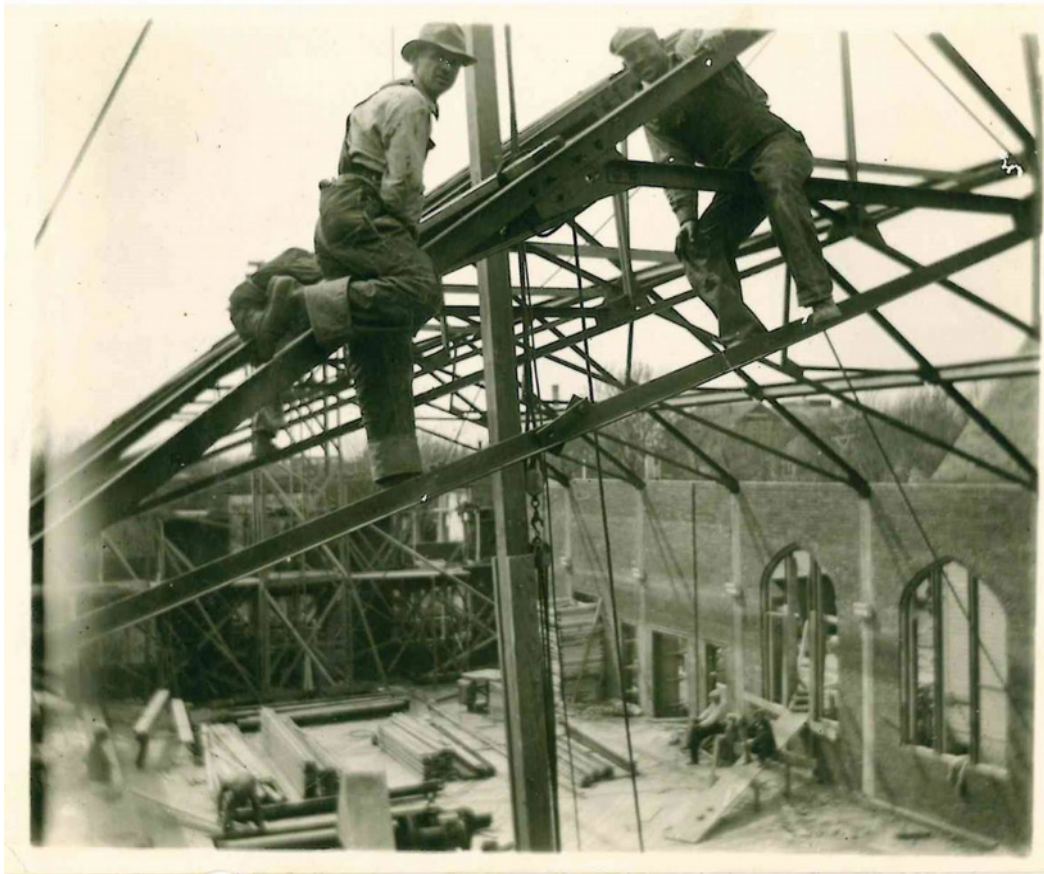


In the aftermath of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, some amount of Mennonite refugee families immigrate to Harvey County and join FMC. Among them is the family of Abraham and Elizabeth Warkentin.

Abraham Warkentin is:

- An assistant pastor at FMC for 19 years – 1924 until 1944.
- A professor of Bible and German at Bethel College.
- Instrumental in the creation of the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College.
- A key person in the founding of the Mennonite Biblical Seminary as well as its first president.

FMC church under construction in 1931 and 1932. Looking to rear of sanctuary and balcony.



With membership rising above 300 by 1928, planning begins for a new building. This has the potential for being highly problematic. National catastrophe will hit very soon with the 1929 stock market crash sparking the Great Depression of the 1930s.

While the grim economic conditions are definitely a hardship for many members of First Mennonite, the Great Depression does not stop the members from constructing a new building. Ground breaking happens in November of 1931.

The congregation sees a need and meets the need. Many rural church members donate their labor. Many city church members are able to give cash. Paid construction workers receive 60 cents per hour (the equivalent of \$9.90 in 2018).

Even though the worst Depression years are in 1932 and 1933, the sanctuary and basement are completed and dedicated in 1932; and the bell tower in 1933.

Fast Facts about FMC: 1910s – 1950s

1917-18 – Anti-German sentiment grips the nation. Newton's Ministerial Union threatens FMC with closure for using the German language in its services and meetings.

1920 – FMC gives women voting rights in church business matters. This occurs before the United States Constitution gives women the right to vote at the national level.

1938 –

- Use of German language ends in FMC's congregational business meetings.
- Mission Study Circle is organized for women as well as groups for girls. Stated purpose is to be informed about missions, and to support mission causes. The group comes to an end in 2018.

1942 – After 64 years of use of the German language at FMC, the transition from German to English is complete within FMC as the *Mennonite Hymnary* replaces the long standing German hymnal.

1950 – Construction of west education wing adds 17 rooms and completes the original building concept. Included in the wing is the “Warkentin Room,” a conference and meeting room named for Abraham Warkentin (FMC's highly regarded minister from 1924-1944). Also, there is spacious accommodation for the church library.

1953 – Membership reaches 815 due to Newton's industrial growth. The congregation's diversity increases through inclusion of those with non-Mennonite backgrounds as well as Mennonites from European backgrounds beyond Prussia and South Russia (Ukraine).

Fast Facts about FMC: 1950s – 1970s

1955 –

- Church split occurs as Newton Bible Church is formed when forty FMC members leave since they want an independent Bible church which would have a *“Spirit-filled evangelistic witness.”* The new congregation meets initially in the old Newton City Auditorium; then in the National Guard Armory; and eventually builds a church at SE 10th and Old Main streets.
- Carloads of FMC volunteers go to Udall, Kansas for tornado cleanup.
- Menno Schrag of FMC begins Mennonite Boys League, with membership eventually reaching 1,800 in various General Conference churches within the U.S. and Canada.

1957 – FMC gives support to the organization of Faith Mennonite Church in Newton.

1964 – The south education wing is built. In addition to classrooms, there is a full kitchen, offices for the pastors, a nursery, and a “court” area for group interaction.

1965 – Nineteen FMC families receive financial assistance after the historic June 1965 flood when Newton's Sand Creek overflows its banks.

1969 – “New Directions,” a high school and college age choir, is formed. It receives invitations to churches in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska plus the 1971 conference of the General Conference.

1979 –

- FMC volunteers make multiple trips to Wichita Falls, TX for tornado clean-up and repair.
- Sponsorship is given to Vietnamese refugees and to some Chinese men.

Fast Facts about FMC: 1980s to present

1981 –

- Membership reaches all-time high of 1,003.
- Sponsorship is given to a second group of Vietnamese refugees.

1984 – FMC partners in sponsoring Hope Mennonite Church, a new congregation in Wichita.

1987 – Grace Community Church organizes in Newton. A group from FMC are among the founding members of Grace Community.

2002 – FMC becomes part of Mennonite Church USA.

In more recent years, service projects have included:

- House construction in Colorado, Louisiana, Nebraska.
- Mennonite Disaster Service cleanup efforts after various calamities and catastrophes.

Throughout its history, FMC has sent missionaries and service workers to locations within the U.S. and around the world.

For additional stories about FMC's happenings over the years, refer to Mission & Memory, the magazine which marked the 125th anniversary of First Mennonite Church. Copies are available by contacting the church office at:

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Mission and Memory Belong Together

The church's story – its collective memory – tells us what God has done in the past.

Its mission – grounded in the past – is what God calls us to do, now and in the future.

Or, to look at it another way –

We are called to be:

Faith-Focused

Mission-Minded

Community-Connected

