Yoder Mennonite Church. Courtesy of Jay M. Price, Wichita, Kansas.
I’m not a scholar, but a preacher—a preacher who is not an authority on Mennonite Church architecture—a field of which I might well say—“They ain’t no such animal.”—Pastor George Stoneback

“I would like to see some trained architect and engineer who is steeped in the Mennonite tradition develop a truly Mennonite church style that embodies the best of the past tradition with the best modern achievement to produce a truly worshipful church that would symbolize our simple life.” So said Pastor George Stoneback in 1942 at a conference on Mennonite cultural issues held at Winona Lake, Indiana. This statement, made toward the end of his discussion, summarized the tensions that faced religious construction for Mennonites. A cornerstone of Mennonite practice was that of simplicity, a value manifested in the plain meetinghouse rather than the ornate church. Yet Mennonites could be prone to the opposite extreme, erecting structures so stark that they were cold, lifeless, and uninspiring. The solution, Stoneback suggested, was to have a place “worshipful” enough to “take even the most indifferent person and make him feel the presence of God” while also grounding the Mennonite avoidance of the showy. Other denominations and traditions could express worshipfulness through ornament, symbolism, and liturgy. For Mennonites, however, where even displaying a cross on the outside of a building was controversial, that goal required a more delicate conversation.1
Stoneback spoke at the onset of World War II, framing a discussion that guided the Mennonite building boom from the 1940s to the 1960s. Mennonites were just starting to join the great midcentury church-building boom. Not a numerous group and divided into various denominational branches, Mennonites were increasing in numbers, with new congregations being planted in cities—often for the first time. In rural areas, growth from large families called for more spacious houses of worship and Sunday school rooms. In a few cases, new construction was a necessity because of fires and—for those situated in Tornado Alley—destruction from storms.

Their efforts represent a unique example of a nationwide phenomenon as Catholics, Jews, and a wide range of Protestant groups embarked on one of the most dynamic and influential periods in American religious history. Mission efforts on the part of denominational offices, national federations, extension organizations, missionary groups, dioceses, Sunday school boards, individual congregations, consultants, and charismatic evangelists were focused on reaching out to a mobile North American mission field. These efforts began in the 1920s and 1930s but reached a fever pitch in the decades after World War II, when families were on the move and growing with a new cohort of baby boom youngsters, filling worship services and Sunday schools to the bursting point. The old ties to ethnicity and region were fading, and by the 1950s, congregations were engaged in a competition to grow, gain new members, and then plant new mission congregations. Church buildings were therefore important, both as congregational centers and as elements to attract new members. Statistics from the Department of Commerce show that $26 million was spent nationally on religious construction in 1945, $76 million in 1946, and $409 million in 1950. By 1960 the value of religious construction topped a billion dollars a year and maintained that level for the rest of that decade.2

Strategies for building construction varied; some efforts favored erecting fashionable buildings on prime suburban lots to convey a sense of respectability while others were pragmatic. Church building consultants often advocated building “first units” to found a congregation. The early congregation would then presumably grow and eventually construct a more substantial sanctuary, converting the old first unit into the parish hall or education wing. Some denominations, like the Southern Baptists, engaged in mission planting in an almost assembly-line manner, complete with stock architectural plans that could be purchased from the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville, Tennessee, and utilized again and again with just minor adaptations.3

This activity coincided with an equally visible conversation about the nature of worship space, architecture, liturgy, and a host of other issues. Denominational and regional meetings were devoted to the topic of building. The National Council of Churches and an affiliated organization dedicated to Protestant church building, the Church Architectural Guild of America, hosted annual competitions and meetings on these topics. There were also entire journals dedicated to construction and religious art and architecture, including Church Management, Protestant Church Administration & Equipment, Church Property Administration, and Liturgical Arts. National journals from the Christian Century and Liturgical Arts to Time and Life ran extended articles and letters about building controversies. Much of the conversation came from national-level consultants such as Elbert Conover, John Scotford, Harold Wagoner, and Harry Atkinson, who traveled the country consulting with congregations,


published books, and wrote advice pieces in national building journals.4

Just what that religious landscape looked like, however, was in flux. There was a widespread popular attitude about what a house of worship “should” look like. This look was often some form of revival style—whether a miniature Gothic cathedral, a New England meetinghouse, a Colonial brick edifice with white trim, or some variant of Spanish mission. Others, however, were critical of America becoming a “church museum,” arguing instead that a modern society needed suitably modern churches. Consultants often argued that contemporary families wanted a comfortable, familiar-looking space that was tastefully appointed, had the latest conveniences, and could be used for weekday social events as well as Sunday worship. Other discussions focused on how, or even whether, modern architecture could be adapted to sacred functions.5

The Mennonite postwar building program, and the conversation and controversy it generated presents a useful perspective on these issues. Both then and now, the efforts of mainstream Protestant groups have attracted the most attention; alongside the work of Catholics and Jews, it is tempting to conclude that the experiences of the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists reflected (to a degree) the story of other Protestants. Although the Mennonite contribution to the building boom did reflect many of the same themes found nationwide, it included several aspects of Mennonite faith and practice that shaped the effort in some unique ways. The quest for a distinctive Mennonite architecture, envisioned as more than just structures for a suburban religious marketplace, was problematic at best. The main features of worship space that advocates felt were unique to the tradition were in fact not that different from those of a host of other denominations. In terms of architectural history—even vernacular architectural history—the Mennonite experience paralleled that of many groups. Using architecture as a window into how a particular religious or ethnic population attempted to reconcile itself with larger social and cultural trends, however, reveals a more complicated story.6

Like most religious groups, Mennonites erected numerous new buildings in the decades after World War II and added on to and remodeled others—albeit on a somewhat more modest scale compared to many other denominations. During this period, Mennonites of the Great Plains area constructed over 110 new houses of worship, 59 of them in Kansas. While impressive, the Mennonite program was less dramatic than that of the Southern Baptists, for example, whose presence in Kansas alone grew from just a handful of congregations in the early 1940s to over 100 by 1955. These calculations are based on a survey of the news reports of the inter-Mennonite weekly newspaper, the Mennonite Weekly Review, for the period 1945–75, looking at all Mennonite conferences and denominations (including the General Conference Mennonites, Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite Church [“Old Mennonites”], Church of God in Christ Mennonites [Holdeman], various Amish groups, and independent Mennonite congregations).

Like many Protestant groups, the Mennonites’ building program fell under the area of “Home Missions,” in contrast to overseas missions. Bodies such as the Board of Home Missions—later the Home Missions Section and the establishment of Church Extension Services, Inc.—assisted in the planting of new congregations, especially in urban areas. For one Mennonite denomination, the General Conference, by 1955 this equated to 234 churches and 48,000 members, nearly double the numbers of the 1920s.7 By states, the numbers of newly constructed

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Mennonite houses of worship broke down like this: North Dakota, 4; South Dakota, 11; Nebraska, 13; Kansas, 59; Oklahoma, 20; and Texas, 3. It was very common for congregations to report building news to the Mennonite newspaper, but some did not. The actual numbers of new constructions were larger; the figures above do not include many remodeling projects on older buildings and adding on of “educational units.”

As the numbers indicate, the Mennonite building program in Kansas was the largest of those in all the Great Plains and midwestern states. There are several reasons for this. With its Mennonite heartland of Marion, McPherson, and Harvey Counties, Kansas had, according to one 1957 estimate, about 21,500 Mennonites from a number of different traditions. The largest number were with the General Conference Mennonite Church, a body that tended to mirror mainline Protestant denominations, the Mennonite world often looked to college faculty such as Bethel’s Cornelius Krahn, to guide the discussion of Mennonite art and architecture. Newton and North Newton, Kansas, in particular were important centers; they were the home of the regional office of the Mennonite Central Committee and the Mennonite Press as well as a number of important national-level organizations, including the offices of the General Conference Mennonite Church and that organization’s Western District Conference. Kansas was also home to a number of particularly significant structures that gained comment in Mennonite building discussions across North America. The Mennonite experience in Kansas thus defined a conversation that resonated across the tradition.8

Mennonites are both a people rooted in a distinct cultural and ethnic background and a religious tradition tied to several key theological perspectives. What began as a movement of German and Dutch-speaking Anabaptists from Switzerland, and Holland became a diaspora that included migrations to the Vistula and Volga Rivers, where they established themselves as pockets of German-speaking Protestants in a sea of Catholic and Orthodox Slavic speakers. At times, they embraced an identity that was as much cultural as theological in nature, speaking Low German Plautdietsch and marrying within the bounds of a specific set of families. In other contexts, Mennonites defined themselves through theology. Those who emphasized the theological distinctiveness of the movement talked about “Mennonite” or “Anabaptist” as nearly interchangeable. Whether they saw themselves as a religious movement or an ethnic group, Mennonites saw being distinct and separate from the larger society as an important characteristic, one that they carried with them to North America in the late nineteenth century.

Regarding worship space, however, Mennonite practice was harder to distinguish from those of other Protestants. Menno Simons and other Anabaptist reformers took issue with reformers such as John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli over predestination and infant baptism and maintained a passionate commitment to pacifism that put them at odds with Protestant as well as Catholic and Orthodox rulers. However, Mennonites did approve of the Reformed Protestant approach to simplified worship space. Like many Protestant groups from the Reformed tradition, Mennonites held that the assembled faithful was the “church,” not the structure where they gathered; that was a meetinghouse. Architect Harold Funk once described how Mennonite meetinghouse architecture tended to embody several features. Among them were

- A single space rather than a nave/chancel distinction that separated the congregation from the clergy.
- The pulpit as the focal point, with the seating arranged around it to highlight the importance of preaching.
- A square worship space that reinforced a sense of the community of congregation and preacher as a single whole.
- Simplicity in furnishing and a rejection of ornament.
- Avoidance of iconography and restraint in the use of symbols (even Christian symbols could lend themselves to idolatry).
- Avoidance of stained glass in favor of clear windows that allowed light in.

In one sense, these features defined the space in contrast to the rituals, symbols, ornament, and hierarchy that had developed in the Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran traditions. That said, features that commentators like Funk suggested were distinctive to Mennonite/Anabaptist worship space were, in fact, found across the Protestant world; from the Puritan meetinghouses of New England to Reformed houses of worship in the Dutch-speaking world and from nonconformist chapels in Britain and Unitarian structures in Transylvania to the revival-oriented auditoriums of Pietist and Evangelical groups.

Early on, when the Mennonites were a persecuted underground movement, space for worship had to be low-key, indistinguishable from other utilitarian buildings like warehouses and storerooms. Later, Mennonites insisted that their meetinghouses be intentionally distinct from the ornate churches of the surrounding state religions. In the 1800s the Mennonites carried this built heritage with them to North America. Now that they were located in a place without a state church, however, Mennonites found themselves confronted with a new challenge. Because they were no longer constrained to accept an official minority status, it became all too easy to imitate the surrounding society, including buildings for worship. Thus, being distinctive was no longer the issue; remaining distinctive was.

The typical early American Mennonite meetinghouse—low; plain; without tower, bell, or colored glass—has been described by John L. Ruth as “architectural humility.” The Old Order Amish, the most conservative wing of Mennonites, had no church buildings at all, choosing rather to meet in homes. For the more conservative Mennonite congregations, working with Protestant groups and movements implied conforming too much to the world. They saw themselves as retaining a Protestant or simply Christian way of worship in contrast to groups such as Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and, later on, Methodists, who sought to convey a sense of “respectability” in which the middle and upper classes sought to temper a rapidly industrializing world with the values of “Civilization” and “Christendom.” In many cases, that respectability included an embrace of the Gothic Revival, an architectural style that suggested a connection between medieval Christendom and Victorian society. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century Gothic Revival movement in America had spiritual and philosophical roots, including the embrace of liturgical worship, but was also related to shifts in architectural fashions. It began among the Oxford Movement among Anglicans who rejected Calvinist simplicity in favor of Medieval, even Catholic devotional worship, but soon spread among other Protestant traditions. Across the Victorian world, the cultural


pendulum had swung toward romanticism and a renewed appreciation for the Middle Ages. Americans applied Medieval themes to literature, art, and religion and preeminently to the building of neomedieval houses of worship in the Romanesque and Gothic styles—reviving a mystical sense of faith along with the physical revival of great architecture. Ecclesiological societies promoted the medieval models as the true “architecture of Christianity.”

Many Protestant groups, such as Southern Baptists, initially considered Medieval revivals too “Catholic” and insisted on classical or other styles instead. Similarly, there were few signs that Mennonites approached architecture through such elevated speculations, although some congregations did pick up elements of “churchly” architecture in their frame meetinghouses, including the use of pointed Gothic windows and sometimes a tower (the Mennonite Brethren denomination, in fact, favored buildings with two imposing square towers). The early twentieth century did witness the construction of Gothic Revival structures, such as the First Mennonite in Berne, Indiana, and the works of William Lewis Kramer in Ohio, that became noted for their imposing presence and adherence to Victorian Medieval revival styles. These, however, tended to be the proverbial exceptions that proved the rule. Overall, Mennonites were practical people best known for building functional houses and barns, a tradition that carried over into the meetinghouse.

Moreover, even the liturgical orientation of the Oxford Movement or the ornate Gothic and Romanesque revivals inspired by Richard Upjohn, Henry Hobson Richardson, and A. W. N. Pugin were largely urban predilections. In the middle of the country, where congregations of farmers—both Mennonite and non-Mennonite—had limited finances and equally limited time and therefore constructed practical buildings that served their needs. Mennonites as a group tended to avoid larger cities such as Omaha, Kansas City, Tulsa, and Wichita, although individual families did relocate to those places. Mennonites remained a rural people well into the twentieth century, wary of even towns like Newton, let alone larger cities, until 1922 that the Western District Home Mission efforts finally established a congregation, initially named the Hutchinson Mennonite Church. Wichita had been turned down as even a mission effort twice in 1892 and 1912. The Mennonite preference for a simple meetinghouse was both a unique theological ideal and a typical building type found across the region regardless of denomination.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Mennonites on the Great Plains continued as an insular, ethnic tradition, a factor that had an important role in shaping how a building program functioned. They did not follow the example of the Lutherans, whom “the Mennonites called ‘church people’ in contrast with themselves who were, shall we say, ‘meetinghouse people?’” Into the 1910s the Lutherans were also (to a large extent) an ethnic denomination made up mainly of German and Scandinavian immigrants or their children. Half of Lutheran services were in German, Swedish, or another Scandinavian language.

America’s entry into World War I altered this, as hostility toward all things German profoundly impacted any religious group with a German tie. For Mennonites, the era was a time of painful struggle; ethnic prejudice and hostility over pacifism resulted in congregations and organizations coming together for support and comfort. For Lutherans, however, the war marked the start of a shift away from specific ethnic groups to reaching out to the broad spectrum of North American society. From the 1920s through the 1960s, congregations from the main Lutheran denominations such as the American Lutheran

Church, United Lutheran Church in America, and the Lutheran Church in America embraced worship in English. Several denominations became more ecumenical, working alongside Methodists and Presbyterians on a host of issues, becoming in effect another set of mainline Protestant groups.

Lutherans also began extensive evangelism programs, thus becoming a mainline body open to people from a wide range of backgrounds. Some, such as the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), were especially enthusiastic in expanding out of the Midwest heartland to plant congregations across the country, especially in the suburbs of the developing cities of the American South and West. This enthusiasm came with resources. The ULCA and the LCMS national bodies had committees and bureaus to guide building programs. There were loan programs to help plant congregations. There were figures such as Edward Frey for the ULCA and Frederick Roth Webber and Uel Ramey for the LCMS, who were national-level consultants on church-building matters who assisted congregational efforts to erect building that were “worshipful,” attractive (since attracting new members as an important part of the postwar building program), functional, and also cost effective. Individuals, boards, and denominations were investing a lot in church building and these consultants wanted to make sure there was a good return on those investments. The effort seemed to pay off, with at least one source from 1946 suggesting that across the country, there was a new Lutheran church organized every seventeen days. At its peak, the LCMS mission program claimed to create a new Lutheran congregation every fifty-four hours!¹⁵


The construction of the Lorraine Avenue building was a departure from tradition but also the start of a new phase of Mennonite construction—one more comfortable with stained glass windows and ornamentation. This building was among the first Mennonite structures to intentionally incorporate some elements of beauty along traditional Gothic lines. Mennonites met at this building at Gilbert and Lorraine Avenue in Wichita in the roofed-over basement beginning in August 1947. Dedication of the completed structure took place on Sunday, November 25, 1951; the congregation dedicated its education wing in September 1963. Courtesy of the Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

The Lutherans’ extensive, even aggressive, mission planting and building effort stood in marked contrast to the Mennonites’ continued practice of founding a congregation and erecting a building only after a core of families had arrived in a given area. Mennonites had less incentive to construct fashionable edifices to attract newly arrived families from a wide range of backgrounds. Nor did they feel the need to plant as many “first units” as possible in the hopes of expanding a denominational presence in a growing city.¹⁶

That started to change by the middle of the twentieth century, however, as rural populations from a wide range of backgrounds moved to urban areas in search of new opportunities. It was this rural-to-urban migration that finally convinced the Western District Conference’s
more substantial worship space could be erected. In 1939 the congregation began to look seriously at constructing a permanent building, approaching the Western District Conference’s Home Missions Committee in search of the necessary funds. Told there was no money to be had for new buildings, the congregation created an expansion revolving fund for construction.

The committee began the building process with a step that was routine for most prominent congregations at the time but jarringly radical for Mennonites: they hired a consultant. Moreover, they did not even hire a Mennonite, instead reaching out to Henry E. Tralle of Washington, D.C. An American Baptist, Tralle emerged in the early 1900s as an expert in the design and function of Sunday schools. He then established his credentials in 1921 through publication of his book Planning Church Buildings and later joined the staff of the Protestant building trade journal Church Management. Tralle became a well-known name in church building circles, joining the ranks of denominational consultants like Elbert Conover, John Scotford, and William Leach. Hiring Tralle thus marked an open move on the part of Lorraine Avenue to function akin to a mainline Protestant organization, rather than a more traditional rural Mennonite one.

Tralle drew up a preliminary floor plan and recommended that the congregation engage the services of local architect Glen H. Thomas to complete the design. As with Tralle, the committee was making a statement not just in hiring an architect but in hiring one of the city’s most well-known. Although Thomas had a reputation for high-end civic projects—most notably the Pueblo Deco-style North High and the city’s Art Deco municipal airport—rather than as a specialist in religious architecture, he had designed the new sanctuary for Wichita’s First Baptist Church in the late 1940s.

To conduct the financial campaign, Lorraine Avenue hired Orville A. Boyle, another prominent Wichitan who was not a Mennonite. A Methodist, Boyle was known as a manager of projects, including the city’s first air show in 1911 and, later, the local transportation network known as the Arkansas Valley Interurban. However, the campaign had to be put on hold due to the onset of World War II. It was not until after the war that the necessary $22,000 in pledges came in, allowing the congregation to purchase the parsonage from the Home Missions Committee. In November 1945 groundbreaking finally began.

Work was slow; numerous issues arose, including postwar construction demands and materials shortages. Nearly a year after the initial groundbreaking, the cornerstone of the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite church was laid on Sunday, October 6, 1946. By August 1947 the walls were up, and the congregation met in the roofed-over basement. Lorraine Avenue then debated on how to proceed. One suggestion was to build just the worship space and leave the education wing for another phase, a not uncommon practice in building programs through the midcentury decades. This was accepted as the best course of action, and the worship space was dedicated on Sunday, November 25, 1951. Just over ten years later, in September 1963, the congregation dedicated its education wing.

Reflecting on the buildings’ legacy, Melvin Schmidt, in David Haury’s history of the congregation, recalled, “The building was a harbinger of things to come....

17. David Haury, A People of the City, A History of Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, 1932–1982 (Wichita: Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, 1982), 21–42
18. Walter Grundman, “History of the Lorraine Ave. Mennonite Church of Wichita, Kansas,” (Mennonite history course paper, Bethel College, May 24, 1948), 9–10; minutes of the church council of Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, 1939–1941 (hereafter Lorraine Avenue minutes). The authors want to thank Murray Reimer Penner for guiding them through the Lorraine archives and for providing valuable background on the congregation’s story.
20. Haury, A People of the City, 125–130.
Durability inspired the Hoffnungsa Mennonite Church of Inman, Kansas, after its venerable, historic frame 1898 meeting house burned to the ground on February 14, 1948. Members worked quickly to replace their structure, and in line with the congregation’s desires, the resulting Neo-Gothic structure featured blond-colored bricks with trim of Kansas limestone from the Silverdale Cut Stone Company of Silverdale, Kansas, and a roof of red and brown clay tiles. The Jacoby Art Glass Company of St. Louis provided the stained glass windows, representing classic Christian symbols. Courtesy of the Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

The Lorraine Avenue building was among the first to incorporate some elements of beauty along traditional Gothic lines. There were rumors in some rural areas that the group in Wichita was building a ‘Catholic’ church.” Schmidt suggests that member J. B. Muller, whose home hosted worship services in the 1930s, was also a builder and wanted the structure to “look like a church.” It was a departure from tradition but also the start of a new phase of Mennonite construction, one increasingly more comfortable with stained-glass windows and ornament.21

Lorraine’s Gothic Revival edifice was itself not unusual for the era but was nothing like a traditional meetinghouse from rural Marion County. Mennonites were now joining a Protestant embrace of Gothic Revival and devotional worship that began in the nineteenth century and took root across a wide spectrum of religious traditions after World War I. The inspiration came less from the great cathedrals, however, than from modest European country chapels. This interest in a “worshipful space” coincided with the rise of the chancel and altar as the focal point of a “sanctuary” instead of the pulpit and choir. Gothic Revival became the style of choice for the first wave of suburban church buildings, suggesting a reverent, respectful house of worship. Religious consultants were especially fond of the “divided chancel,” with the altar as the focus of worship, flanked on one side by a pulpit and on the other by a lectern. While Colonial Revival and Spanish and Pueblo Revival were also common, Gothic Revival emerged as the ultimate expression of what a church building should be for large numbers of Americans. It went through a number of phases, from dutiful re-creations of French country chapels during the 1920s to the adoption of the chapel in more modest expression during the 1930s’ “small church movement” and, by the 1940s, fusions of the pointed arch and divided chancel with Art Deco features and utilitarian construction practices such as the use of laminated trusses. By the 1950s Gothic Revival had long shed its associations with being too Catholic to become the standard look for what the American public considered a church building to be.22

Although a break from tradition, Mennonites up and down the Great Plains built substantial churches in the

21. Ibid., 118–20, quote from 118.

Gothic (or Romanesque) neomedieval style—buildings that “really looked like churches,” at least among congregations with large, prosperous memberships. One Mennonite builder, Sam Ediger—known for erecting many Kansas Mennonite churches—theorized that the fascination with the Gothic style came from a desire to preserve and protect the congregations. As far as he could discern, Mennonites admired European historic castles and churches “that had endured hundreds of years of history (emphasizing a solid community with a positive vision for the future).”

The new Gothic plans provided these features while also illustrating Mennonite refinement and prosperity.

Along with architectural beauty, Mennonites desired fireproof and storm-resistant stone and brick structures, complete with modern amenities like organs, indoor plumbing, and (eventually) air conditioning. Such durability inspired an early Gothic Revival Mennonite church, the Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church, located near Inman, Kansas. On February 14, 1948, its venerable large frame meetinghouse of 1898 burned to the ground.

23. Interview with Sam Ediger (reputation: “known for his life mission of building church structures” 1999, by Willmar Harder, quoted in Harder’s paper “Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church: A Space of Hope on the Kansas Prairie” (Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 1999), 3.
This congregation of 361 members had been established in 1874 after immigration from Europe. The loss of the “historic landmark” was a terrible blow, and there was no time to lose in rebuilding. Pastor Albert Gaeddert stated, “Of course, we could do no other than to plan immediately for a new building.”

A building committee quickly set to work, its first task to find an architect. The committee recommended contacting an architect in Chicago, who responded—with an eye to the picturesque—by advising them that all rural churches should be white frame buildings. This advice was not well received. Rather than a romanticized country church, the congregation wanted a sturdy, fire-proof structure, one able to withstand Kansas storms and equipped with modern amenities, like indoor toilets. Members of the committee traveled to Wichita to visit several churches, as they liked the Gothic architecture of Glen H. Thomas (of the firm Thomas & Harris). “We all came back with one accord… that’s the building we want.” Likely, this choice was influenced by Thomas’s previous work with Mennonites in Wichita.

In line with the congregation’s desires, Thomas proposed a Neo-Gothic structure with a massive tower, a long sanctuary with a center aisle, pointed arches, stained-glass windows, and a chancel set off from the sanctuary by a banister wall (suggesting to some a separation of the lay congregation from the ordained clergy in the pulpit). The chancel platform had a center pulpit for preaching, a space for the choir, and three large chairs (“thrones,” some called them) for the ministers. The exterior was composed of blond-colored bricks with Kansas limestone trim from the Silverdale Cut Stone Company of Silverdale, Kansas, and red and brown clay tiles covering the roof. The Jacoby Art Glass Co of St. Louis provided the stained-glass windows, representing classic Christian symbols.

When viewing the plans, Pastor Gaeddert cautiously raised concerns about the appropriateness of such a building for Mennonites, especially its massive tower, which suggested to him a military fortress, not the Mennonite nonresistant spirit. He did not push the issue, and the congregation, confident in the quality of its architect, moved forward with the plans without stopping for theological speculations.

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25. Ibid., 80; Haury, People of the City, 120; Glen Ediger, Hoffnungsau: A Hopeful View (Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 2014), 78.
26. Ediger, Hoffnungsau, 81–82.
27. A few years later Pastor Gaeddert spoke out more forcefully. Writing in the congregation’s Centennial History, he regretted their undue haste in architectural choices, noting, “We might have done quite a bit more toward engaging an architect who would have designed a building that would have given expression to our rich heritage; but we were not so sensitive to our heritage as we are now when we are at the centennial crossroads of our history.” Gaeddert, Centennial History of Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church, 1874–1974, 94. A later pastor, Willmar Harder, who served from 2001 to 2009, opined, “Where the destroyed building had reflected a Russian Mennonite tradition of worship and worship space, the new building now reflected a more ‘high church’ Protestant building.” Quoted in Harder, “Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church,” 2–3.
Work started almost immediately, with the cornerstone laid on December 12, 1948; little more than a year later, on January 22, 1950, the completed structure was dedicated. The final cost was $148,000, not counting the great amount of donated labor from members. The congregation could now take great satisfaction in having “one of the most substantial and modern rural church buildings in the central Kansas area.” In the decades since, the sturdy building has served the congregation well, surviving a direct hit from a tornado in 1974 with minimal damage.

The Hoffnungsau people eventually made a few changes from the original design. These included modifying the preaching platform (chancel) by removing the railing and banister to give it a more open and inviting look and removing the elaborate thronelike preachers’ chairs so that the preacher sits among the people and rises from the congregation to preach. Glen Ediger in his recent congregational history observed that “the pulpit now was accessible, the feeling of ‘High Church’ formality was diminished, and the arrangements fit better with the style of worship of the day.” The congregation also made practical changes, adding a paved drop-off area and a new entrance providing handicapped accessibility. An elevator was installed in 1984.

In matters of Mennonite architecture, the Hoffnungsau congregation was innovative. But in another area it was quite conservative, especially in retaining its Germanic

30. Ediger, Hoffnungsau, 125.
32. Ediger, Hoffnungsau, 162.
33. Ibid., 147–149.
heritage and the original German name of “Hoffnungsaus.” From time to time congregants have discussed moving to an Americanized name (such as “Hopeview” or “Hopeful View Mennonite Church”), but the traditional name prevails.

The First Mennonite Church of Christian, located in Moundridge, Kansas, produced another of the new Mennonite Gothic Revival temples. Its historic frame building of 1884 was still standing and usable into the 1940s, but many deemed it terribly out-of-date. Pastor P. P. Wedel observed, “It is natural therefore that thoughts of a new House of God would come to our members.” World War II prevented any building projects of this kind; following the war, however, the congregation, with “considerable enthusiasm, voted on November 6, 1945, to build a new, modern church.” Building and finance committees were established, and a motto—based in part on Nehemiah 2:18—was chosen: “In the name of Christ, ‘Let us rise up and build!’”

By ballot vote on May 19, 1946, the congregation approved the plans of the architectural firm of Mann and Company of Hutchinson (headed by Arthur R. Mann and Robert Eugene Mann, father and son). The Manns were well-known in church architectural circles; they were on the recommended list of architects from Elbert M. Conover, the New York church consultant. The architect provided a cross-shaped plan “of Gothic design,” with a long nave and a raised chancel and with the communion table (altar) in the central position. Seating capacity was 400–500. It promised to be “a fine new house of worship” and “modern in every respect.” This fine new house was slow to take shape, however, as building materials were scarce in the years following the war. To clear the site, the congregation sold the old building, and the buyer dismantled it for the lumber. The groundbreaking ceremony finally took place on February 20, 1949, and the dedication on November 5, 1950. The final cost was $134,263.56 (not counting the volunteer labor of members). The new building was built on the same tract of land as the old one.

The congregation seemed pleased with Mann’s design for the new church; members saw it as a beautiful house of worship and a functional structure that “provides all needed facilities.” In the planning stage, no one voiced particular theological or artistic concerns about the plans, confident that they had hired a very competent, modern architect. He “presented some plans and they went

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34. First Mennonite of Christian was a congregation of 276 members affiliated with the General Conference Mennonite Church. Although located in the town of Moundridge, the name “First Mennonite of Christian” remained, derived from the church having originally been located at the town of Christian before moving into Moundridge.


with it,” one member recalls, and “it was all well received by the congregation.” Another member, now one of the oldest of the congregation (age eighty-eight) has similar memories: “Oh we were pleased as punch.” It offered all the modern amenities—a basement with a kitchen for meals and wedding receptions and much-appreciated indoor bathrooms—which the old building lacked. Another member spoke of the “new and beautiful church… a great asset for the congregation.”38 Such approving comments were no doubt reflective of the opinions of a great many members. If there were reservations about the architecture being “too Catholic” or too formalistic, they were not serious enough to manifest in the sources and memories that have survived. When asked to recall any discussion about using the Gothic architectural style, the elderly member responded, “Oh, I was just married with a baby, and so busy just living. I didn’t notice anything like that.”39

The centrally placed altar with a brass cross and two candlesticks (with the pulpit to the side) gave a formal liturgical atmosphere to the church. The elaborate stained-glass windows (by the St. Joseph Art Glass Works) added dignity and a reverent atmosphere. One member of the building committee, who “had some exposure to Lutheran traditions,” appreciated liturgy, dignity, and “high church styles.” He pushed to include some of these elegant touches in the building.40

The Moundridge Gothic design was a “sermon” in stone. This was a new kind of sermon for Mennonites—the use of architecture to convey a religious message. Architecture provided visual aids that “implant abstract ideas in the human mind,” but only in time did Moundridge begin to truly appreciate the philosophical approach to architecture. Decades after construction took place, a Sunday-morning sermon presented by Jean Wedel—a member of the church and college professor—celebrated the building’s symbolic and iconic nuances, from the symbolic “threes” and “fours” and the Trinitarian-themed fleur-de-lis in the windows to the chancel containing an altar on which “stands a cross, flanked by two candles. The cross, of course, is associated with Christ’s death, and the two candles indicate the divine and human nature of Jesus. When they are lighted, they signify that he is the biblical “Light of the World.” It was a very different space from the simple meetinghouse.41

Wedel concluded that “our church is really a small cathedral,” but for others, it was also a “Mennonite bomb shelter,” solid as a fortress. In 1951 the congregation suddenly found its wonderful new house of worship caught up in the Cold War. In the event of a Soviet nuclear strike, the American population would need safe bomb shelters. With this in mind, the McPherson County Civil Defense Committee determined that “in the event of such an attack, the safest place in Moundridge would be in the basement of the new church.” The committee requested that the church sign a contract and stock the basement with supplies. This war measure was contrary to the church’s pacifist tradition, and, although willing to offer temporary shelter in times of emergency, the church—unwilling to be part of a long-term paramilitary plan—did not sign the contract.42

The Bethel College Mennonite Church in North Newton was another of the Gothic-inspired Mennonite churches built in midcentury. The church first opened in 1897 as an arm of Bethel College, an institution of the General Conference Mennonites. Initially comprised primarily of faculty and students, the congregation met in the college chapel (and assembly hall), located in the old Main Building; for the first twenty-five years, a college official—usually the president—served as pastor of the church. In subsequent decades the congregation grew considerably, reaching out for membership into the wider community (532 members in 1950).43

Following World War II, the congregation voted to build its own building on land adjoining the campus. At the meeting where the decision was made—before consulting with any architects or raising money—it chose the style: “the architecture—Gothic style.”44 Over several

38. Joyce Juhnke, “History of First Mennonite Church of Christian Moundridge, Kansas” (student paper, Bethel College, 1953), 22; comments by members recalling events from 1945 to 1950 based on interviews by Brian Stucky in 2016 (hereafter Stucky interviews). See also email, Brian Stucky to Keith Sprunger, March 10, 2016. Our thanks to Brian Stucky for providing photos and for doing the interviews and the observations about the architecture of First Mennonite Church of Christian.
39. Stucky interviews; a quarter century later (1973), Brian Stucky, a student at Bethel College, gave a talk about Mennonite architecture during a session at the church on “The Use of Art in Worship” (Harvest Thanks Series, November 4–7, 1973).
40. Stucky interviews.
43. Keith Sprunger, Campus, Congregation, and Community: The Bethel College Mennonite Church, 1897–1997 (Newton, KS: Bethel College Mennonite Church, 1997), chap. 1.
years, and after considerable debate, the congregation arrived at the conclusion that “Gothic architecture” could be “Mennonite architecture.” The pastor of the church at the time, Rev. Lester Hostetler, favored Gothic architecture, as did the college president, E. G. Kaufman, and these were powerful voices. On a visit to New York City in the summer of 1945, Hostetler became fascinated with the Gothic architecture of Riverside Church; he began conversations with architectural consultant Elbert M. Conover (and later arranged for Conover to make a visit to North Newton). Conover advised Hostetler that Gothic was currently the preferred style for church architecture, that stone was the best material, and that basements were out of style. He recommended that Bethel College Church secure Lorentz Schmidt of Wichita as architect.45

Schmidt was prominent in the area, having done some work on the Bethel campus as architect for the Science Hall in 1925. An Episcopalian and member of St. James Church in Wichita,46 he showed a strong predilection for the Gothic style, and this seemed to please the Bethel congregation. For the interior, he proposed a long east-west nave capable of seating 752 persons and a center aisle sweeping forward to the chancel, with a central communion table/altar with lighted cross positioned dramatically under the “Trinity Windows” (from the Jacoby Art Glass Company). Some opined that it was more suited to Episcopal liturgical altar-centered worship, but Pastor Hostetler—who loved symbolism, even if it smacked of Episcopalianism—strongly supported the architect’s plan. Hostetler once confided to a member, “If I would not be a Mennonite, I would be an Episcopalian.”47

When meeting with church members to go over the plans, Schmidt expounded on the beauties of the altar-centered worship and assured them that the divided chancel (with divided choir) would not pose a problem; the singing and music in such a setup would be excellent, and “the cross should not be hidden.”48 For the exterior, Schmidt used an English Collegiate Gothic look of Silverdale stone, with buttresses, pointed arches, and a prominent tower (but no spire). Although a majority of the congregation agreed with the architect’s plans, an opposing faction believed that the design went against Mennonite ideals of simplicity—especially regarding the divided chancel design and the exterior tower, which was viewed as too reminiscent of medieval fortresses. Schmidt agreed to soften the fortress look by adding a tall, pointed spire to the tower, but as it turned out, the exterior spire was never built. A cross had a prominent place on the exterior design, positioned high on the pointed arch of the facade. This Bethel College cross of the 1950s was one of the first uses of an external cross on a Mennonite church in America, a practice previously considered too much Catholic or Lutheran.49

Making the church a reality was a great undertaking for the congregation. It broke ground in 1950 and held the dedication ceremony on December 2, 1956 (over ten years past the original decision to build), at a cost of over $400,000. The project required mobilizing the entire membership. When building a new church, the volunteer work for a Mennonite building project was only “voluntary” to a certain extent. A certain amount of community pressure was exerted on members regarding work days; in most churches, record keepers maintained a careful written report of the amount of hours and days worked by each member. The women also did heroic work in money-raising projects, baking an almost never-ending supply of pies and the traditional Mennonite double buns known as zwieback. In the original planning, the kitchen and basement facilities were to be built near the end. The women of the church, however, protested that the kitchen must not be left to the last or else they could not continue their work of cooking and fund-raising. Consequently, the congregation voted to advance the kitchen timetable to the top of the list (along with the sanctuary). Traditionalists grumbled, “Whoever heard of any church which finished the kitchen first?”50

With projects like these, the postwar years “brought an end to the simple ‘meetinghouse’ era.”51 The Mennonites now faced the temptation to have “the building to look like a church ‘ought to look,’” as one congregation put it. Twentieth-century Mennonite architecture began to make considerable use of external and interior crosses,

45. Sprunger, Campus, Congregation, and Community, 59.
46. On Lorentz Schmidt, see obituary, Wichita Morning Eagle, February 6, 1952.
47. Thelma Bartel interview by Keith Sprunger, 1997 (Bethel College Mennonite Church oral history collection); Sprunger, Campus, Congregation, and Community, 59-61.
49. Helen Moyer interview by Carl Edwards, February 1, 1979, quoted in Edwards, “The Organ and Its Use: From the Past to Its Use at Bethel College” (social science seminar paper, Bethel College, 1979), 31; Sprunger, Campus, Congregation, and Community, 60-61.
50. Sprunger, Campus, Congregation, and Community, 63.
crenellated towers, bells, stained glass, and other previously forbidden ornamentation. The auditorium became the “sanctuary,” and the building was increasingly referred to as the “church” rather than the “meetinghouse.” Several Mennonite congregations brought in expert architectural advisers—including Conover, Tralle and C. H. Deardort—and hired prestigious church architects. Denominational magazines carried articles giving advice on good church architecture. In 1950, for example, the editors of *Mennonite Community* magazine devoted an issue to church architecture, advising that Mennonite simplicity had gone far enough. “Anyone who visits Mennonite communities can see that quite often simplicity has become drabness and the worship of God and the teaching of His Word in the plain meeting house is not what it should be.”

The *Mennonite Weekly Review* regularly commented on the postwar Mennonite building boom. Mennonites were busily building schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and (most numerously) new churches. It was big news year after year: in 1948, “literally dozens of major home, business, school, and church projects were begun”; an article the following year announced that 1949 “may be the biggest building year yet.” The *Weekly Review* later noted that 1952 was one of “bumper crop yields and continuation of building programs.” The church seemed to be flourishing. At the same time, the editor of the *Weekly Review* warned that material prosperity and the church-building boom—although a blessing from God—“can also become a moral and spiritual hazard. In our prosperity, like Israel, we so easily forget God.”

These conversations took place just as a major shift in the religious landscape was starting to unfold nationwide. In the 1940s—denomination notwithstanding—only a handful of daring congregations took on the risk and expense of hiring a noted architect to design a modern house of worship that was guaranteed to turn heads and instill controversy. By the 1950s revivalism had become expensive, beyond the reach of all but the most affluent congregations. Cost considerations, as well as changing aesthetic tastes, encouraged congregations to embrace a more simplified approach. Prefabricated materials and standardized construction practices were transforming Americans’ approach to building, including houses of worship. At first congregations built what could be called midcentury traditional, a structure whose overall design hearkened back to pitched roofs and stained glass of earlier revivals but with simplified features, less ornament, and stock materials such as windows and doors. By the 1950s growing numbers of congregations had come to embrace modern architecture for their houses of worship, reflecting American society’s increased comfort with modern architecture more broadly. Additionally, a generation of new clergy had come out of seminaries that had bold modern chapels. High-end structures like the Air Force Academy Chapel, Frank Lloyd Wright’s First Unitarian, the “Fish Church” in Stamford, Connecticut, and Marcel Breuer’s St. John’s Abbey also graced the pages of national journals.

The modernism of these showcase houses of worship was the exception, not the rule of postwar religious construction. The need to construct hundreds of facilities

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resulted in buildings that were plain and utilitarian. They looked little different from the school gymnasiums and classrooms that were also being constructed in vast numbers. The relationship was intentional. Consultants advocated construction take place in stages. In each stage, the goal was to erect a "unit" that, once completed, would serve the congregation as they embarked on the construction of the next unit. In most cases, the goal in the unit approach was to construct a plain building that would become an ordinary social or educational space once the main "worship unit" was done. Pragmatism defined the bulk of postwar religious construction, with cost-conscious building committees selecting features that were inexpensive precisely because they incorporated mass-produced products like laminated trusses and aluminum light fixtures. The result could be very unusual but was more likely to be a fairly standardized look, with a sanctuary consisting of a vast pitched roof that vaulted over a massive open space with a chancel at one end. When resources allowed, abstract designs in stained-glass windows conveyed the tone of a medieval cathedral. Outside, soaring bell towers—often capped by a cross—indicated that the building was a church. Spaces were often devoid of ornament, distilling Christian worship to its simplest elements and embracing asymmetry and abstract design. Some were small and simple, while others sported massive rooflines that vaulted overstark interiors of blond woodwork and abstract stained glass.

For a wide range of denominations, this approach seemed a reasonable balance between modernism and tradition, as a building could "look like a church" without replicating Gothic finials. For Mennonites, however, modernism was complicated. In one sense, it was simple and unornamented and made use of readily available materials—a natural fit with the sacred simplicity of meetinghouse design. In some cases, congregational members with just basic construction know-how helped to erect their house of worship, demonstrating that even in the twentieth century, a community could come together to erect a structure—just with laminated beams instead of clapboards. Prefabricated materials, the ease of construction, and "form follows function" could quite easily express the ideals of sacred simplicity.

Yet modernism also represented a connection to a worldliness that could be at odds with Mennonite precepts. Simply dispensing with Gothic arches did not end the debate about how or whether to reconcile with a contemporary society that demanded comfort and greater aesthetics. The postwar era's focus on contemporary conveniences and comfort seemed self-indulgent. Don Smucker from Mennonite Biblical Seminary warned that "out of all this may come meaningless buildings that emphasize comfort, fine feelings, escape, and pious peace. All this sounds like a new and subtle form of pietism, the perennial enemy of Christian discipleship." Moreover, congregations could just as easily show off with aluminum crosses and unusual rooflines as with Gothic ornament. Thus, symbolism and ornament remained challenging issues, especially when there were still few Mennonites who were practicing architects. Mennonite congregations often had no choice but to engage the services of local architects of other backgrounds. An architect like Episcopalian Glen Thomas, for example, may have been well-meaning and supported by the congregation but might still produce a design full of unintended Anglican influence. In his 1960s analysis of Mennonite church architecture, Harold Funk concluded that there was a danger when "the architect becomes both architect and theologian, which means that the church does not develop out of the essence of the congregation. And contemporaneity alone will not witness to our faith." Although Funk was a Bethel College student at the time, the paper was no mere student exercise; it was a thoughtful discussion that writers and congregations referenced years later, with Funk himself going on to become a leading church architect in Winnipeg.

In writing his paper, Funk joined a postwar discussion regarding the definition of Anabaptist/Mennonite architecture—if such an entity even existed. These discussions appeared in journals such as a General Conference Mennonite Church Educational News Bulletin from February 1955 as well as a January 1957 edition of Mennonite Life. Both featured articles about the "architectural pot-luck" of modern church-building practices, though there seemed to be little consensus. Launching the discussion was a reflection from Don Smucker, whose 1955 Educational News Bulletin piece was reprinted in the 1957 Mennonite Life. By embracing Gothic Revival at one extreme or modernism at the other, Smucker observed that congregations seemed willing "to borrow from the
Middle Ages and/or the Twentieth Century as though the First and Sixteenth Centuries never existed.”

One layer of the conversation involved details of architectural style; whether, for example, the medieval ornamentation of Gothic Revival was appropriate for Mennonite structures. James Bixel of Bethel College disparaged the modern use of Gothic: “Modern Gothic has been seen for what it is—plain fakery. The folly of seeking to clothe the faith of today in the garments of yesterday is becoming increasingly apparent.” By contrast, George Stoneback argued, “Lines that would be functional for a barn or a factory are not functional for a church. The building must say something to the person who approaches and enters it. The church building is a meeting house, but a special kind of meeting house.” Stoneback suggested more of a thoughtful balance. Was the Reformation’s rejection of ornament and symbol a central guard against idolatry or was it itself in danger of becoming an idol? Mennonite practice declared “ourselves central guard against idolatry or was it itself in danger of the domination of a dead past,” including the structures of Anabaptist practice. This allowed for a renewed acceptance of symbolism used with care and restraint. “An architecturally correct church and symbols will not save anybody,” he warned. “Neither will a stark square auditorium, devoid of any symbolism.”

The debate was about more than just style, however. The very nature of the worship space was up for debate, regardless of whether it was Colonial Revival or “ultramodern.” Elmer Ediger, from the General Conference denominational headquarters, wrote disapprovingly about the “altar-centered chancel” common in the Gothic design and how it was creeping into Mennonite churches. In his 1957 Mennonite Life article, Ediger took issue with individuals like Stoneback, lamenting that “it would seem a tragedy if we would turn our back on what Reformers and other Anabaptist leaders recovered in the New Testament church, and continue in what has been an apparent trend with the liturgical movement.”

Even the emphasis on the communion table was at odds with Anabaptist worship—dangerously close to “priestly ritual” instead of the gathering of a community of believers. The divided chancel was problematic as well, suggesting an artificial separation between the gospel and preaching.

Throughout the postwar period and across the religious spectrum, debates about religious architecture raged in denominational journals, in architects’ gatherings, and in the public media. Scholars, clergy, theologians, and builders wrestled with balancing contemporary construction and aesthetics with theological precepts and worship traditions. On the ground, however, the debates were much more pragmatic, as building committees worked to erect buildings that met their needs within a given budget.

For Mennonites in Kansas, the nuances of Anabaptist building ideals ran up against the need on the part of institutions—Bethel, Tabor, and Hesston Colleges, among others—to erect new facilities. Hesston College, for example, joined the era’s passion for chapel building by erecting a new chapel in 1955. It was a joint project between the college and the Hesston Mennonite Church congregation. With laminated trusses and simple lines, the facility was modern and “upto-date,” indicative of the shift in worship space aesthetics away from Bethel College’s Gothic Revival facility. Some new construction was inevitable, as in the case of the fire at Hoffnungsau or in Hutchinson, where Hutchinson Mennonite—now renamed First Mennonite—relocated from downtown to a new suburban location on the city’s northern edge in 1959. The era did see some new mission congregations planted, most notably Calvary Mennonite in Liberal (dedicated in 1959) and Faith Mennonite in Newton (dedicated in 1962), but these were the urban exceptions to a still largely rural rule.

As in earlier decades, a significant element of Mennonite construction in central Kansas in the late 1950s and early 1960s still involved projects in smaller communities. Among them were Harper, Buhler, Elbing, Moundridge, and Hillsboro. In each case, the structure replaced an older, outdated facility for an existing congregation. They were not plants for new mission activity.

The story of Zion Mennonite in Elbing serves as a useful case study of this larger trend, representing the efforts of a rural community some distance from the urban influence of Wichita and the General Conference/Bethel College nucleus of Newton and North Newton. Moreover, the congregation’s detailed records provide a useful window into how a rural building program took place. The congregation erected its first building, a wooden frame structure, in 1883. In 1923 the congregation began construction on a second structure, also white and wooden but with double the space, pointed Gothic arch windows, and a side tower complete with crenellations! By 1954 Zion Mennonite wondered if it was time to update its now thirty-year-old facility.62

At the core of Zion’s efforts were several committees consisting of congregation members, a very different model from Lorraine’s use of nationally known consultants and outside fund-raisers. With a substantial number of members in their fifties and sixties, there would have been strong memories and opinions from the previous building project. In 1954 the congregation established a planning committee of five members to investigate the matter. Six months later Zion concluded that the building program should continue; the trustees created a building committee consisting of William Regier, Albert Entz, Paul Regier, P. C. Andres, and J. H. Regier. At that same meeting, the congregation also voted that no building should be dedicated or completed until at least 75 percent of the cost had been paid. The following year Zion established a three-person finance committee consisting of George Klassen, Willard Regier, and Stanley Wedel to solicit funds for the project. This was not a well-funded mission venture, however, and it took nearly a decade for this modest rural community to raise the necessary funds.

The initial plans proposed constructing an educational wing to the existing church building, and in 1959 the Board of Trustees acquired land for that purpose. In late November the building committee was tasked with presenting “definite plans for a new educational building.” In the meantime, the building committee began contact with a builder. The person selected was not an architect, however, but a construction firm—that of Edward Pyle of McPherson. In May 1960 the congregation proposed canvassing the entire membership by sending out a letter with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. One draft of the letter read, “You will have observed that in the early years of this building movement the thinking was mostly in terms of adding wings to our present sanctuary. Later the trend has been to envision a complete plan with the educational wing to be built first and the sanctuary part later. In the meantime, it was felt that the present sanctuary would hold out until we would feel like completing the entire unit.” The phrasing of the draft provides several insights into Zion Mennonite’s thinking on building construction. The worship space was referred to as a “sanctuary,” a term common among those in the liturgical movement but definitely a departure from the older meetinghouse concept. Moreover, the use of “unit” connects to the era’s trend to build in stages starting with a “first unit.” Finally, the entire discussion of an educational and social wing was typical for the “seven-days-a-week” church plant of the postwar years. Fifty years earlier some Mennonite congregations had split over even having a Sunday school, the notion offending the more conserva-

Faith Church, Sunday,” April 15, Mennonite Weekly Review, April 12, 1962.

62. “First Zion Church at Elbing, Kan. Dedicated June 10, 75 Years Ago,” Mennonite Weekly Review, June 12, 1958; Janzen, “Form and Meaning in Central Kansas Mennonite Buildings for Worship.” The authors are especially grateful to Raymond Reimer, who assisted in searching through congregational materials and provided valuable insights into how certain processes took place.

The Elbing Zion Mennonite congregation held its first communion in this new structure on Sunday, April 7, 1963. The worship area was the “sanctuary” entered through a “lobby” that connected a nursery, education areas, and social spaces. This was not the simple white frame meeting house, nor even a “worshipful space” where the faithful entered the nave through a narthex. This was a contemporary social center, with education and community spaces as much a part of the plan as spaces for Sunday and Wednesday services. Zion’s facility was in keeping with expectations of a typical postwar house of worship, and there was little that distinguished it as a Mennonite building. Courtesy of the Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.
tive members as conforming too closely to institutional “church” practices. Zion’s proposed statement would have been a typical letter for any suburban mainline Protestant building program, which was exactly what made it stand out for a rural Mennonite effort.63

When the congregational ballots came in, a majority (64 to 56) favored the project, but the majority fell short of the required two-thirds needed to pass. In some building programs, this failure would have signified the end of the discussion. In Zion’s case, however, congregational leadership still favored the building program and thus had to determine how to build support. In a December 1960 congregational meeting, the building committee was instructed to go out and canvass church members about how much they might contribute to “the Pyle plan” to erect a new church building. It was a risky decision; there was not a broad consensus in favor of building, and congregationalist groups like the Mennonites had seen cases where congregations split over construction issues. There was even an informal, slightly tongue-in-cheek adage among some Mennonite clergy that a building project was apt to coincide with the ending of a pastor’s term.64

The notes of that canvass provide a rare insight into how ordinary members felt about the building process—a welcome contrast to literature coming from clergy, architects, and consultants. A sampling of the responses (with names of the individuals omitted for privacy) reveals a range of opinions:

First Mennonite in Hillsboro, which decided to build a substantial new facility in the early 1960s, dedicated this strikingly modern structure in 1967. The worship space was covered by a massive gambrel roof, popular in 1960s-era church building design. Whatever reservations there may have been in Mennonite circles about whether modern architecture, stained glass windows, bell towers, and the display of crosses was suitable for Mennonite houses of worship, central Kansas congregations like Hillsboro seemed to answer in the affirmative. Courtesy of Jay M. Price, Wichita, Kansas.

63. Summary of motions of Zion Mennonite Church, Zion Mennonite Church Archives.
“Very favorable. Regrets he is not able to do more. Would appreciate employment at project.”

“Very cooperative. Will give a cow per year.”

“Can’t give but only interested in an entirely new structure.”

“It is a sin to tear down a good building. Violent in criticism of (two members of committee named).”

“Extolled the virtues of pioneer life. Would move to a more primitive community where there is not so much hankering for adequate facilities.”

“Very open in discussion of problem. Also much concerned that building enthusiasm be not mistaken for spiritual vitality.”

“Pieved (sic) at the thought that we might have overlooked her.”

“Suggested building in Peabody and selling present building to those who oppose church building.”

“Attitude changed from one of aversion to willingness to gain more information in a short time. Yielded readily to removal of poison from his mind and filled out the card gladly.”

The notes contain more details for those in opposition to the project than for it. Those in favor range from effusively positive to supportive but unable to contribute. Statements from those who were opposed seem to center on the feeling that a new building was not needed. Detailed discussions of Anabaptist architecture did not appear in the notes that survive. Rather, the discussion was about more practical matters, as to whether the final result was worth the contribution.65

In spite of the opposition, the direct canvass appeared to have changed many people’s minds; on February 13, 1961, the congregation met, and this time the vote was to proceed. The building committee was then directed to arrange for an architect to draw up plans. In the year that followed, the committee engaged the services of Robert E. Marr in McPherson and spent months revising and adapting the plans. The building committee’s report provides a view of the process as well as a description of the eventual L-shaped building: “According to the last revision the wing to the south will be 32 feet wide and not 30 as originally planned. As a result, we will have a lobby two feet longer and two feet wider and most of the affected rooms will also be a little larger. We have also shortened the nursery and so-called overflow area behind the sanctuary two feet in order to have a faster movement of people before and after a service.” Here, again, the text is revealing. The worship area was the “sanctuary” entered through a “lobby” that connected a nursery, education areas, and social spaces. This was not the simple white frame meetinghouse, nor even a “worshipful space” where the faithful entered the nave through a narthex. This was a contemporary social center, with education and community spaces as much a part of the plan as spaces for Sunday and Wednesday services. The sanctuary was framed by laminated wood beams and ended in a raised chancel-like structure containing a central bank of seats for the choir, who faced the congregation. The communion table was in front of the choir, flanked by a pulpit and lectern. A huge simple cross hung on the chancel wall as a focal point. A visitor from a Methodist, Lutheran, or Congregationalist church would have felt right at home. Zion’s facility was in keeping with expectations of a typical postwar house of worship, and there was little that distinguished it as a Mennonite building, a trait that could have been a source of both praise and criticism from the Mennonite community.66

Construction began on a cold Sunday morning in April 1962. There were setbacks—including a hailstorm in May—but confidence in the project continued to grow. The building committee report recalled that “during the weeks of summer when repeated rains were suggesting another bumper crop of milo and corn there were those who whispered to us, ‘It would be demoralizing to quit now,’ or ‘I think we should continue.’” There were compromises to be made, such as a decision not to build a spire with a cross, as the original plans suggested, but otherwise the work of Pyle Construction continued.67

On Sunday, April 7, 1963, Zion Mennonite held its final worship service in the 1920s building and proceeded to a cornerstone laying of the now complete new structure (in this case the cornerstone represented the completion of the process, not the start of the building of the sanctuary), followed by a communion service in the new facility. Just a week later, the dismantling of the old structure was nearly finished, with the lumber sold at auction. A few months later, an official dedication service marked the completion of the building process, which ultimately cost


Elbing’s story paralleled those of other congregations in the area. Just as Zion debated what or whether to build in late 1960, the congregational business meeting of Hebron Mennonite Church at Buhler proposed that the membership vote on several options. These included erecting a new facility on the existing site, moving to a new location, remodeling the existing facility, merging with another congregation, or making no changes at all. The decision was to build a new facility in Buhler—a modern structure with a high-pitched roof.

The same year that Zion dedicated its facility, similar dedication services occurred at Pleasant Valley Mennonite in Harper and West Zion Mennonite in Moundridge. A few years later, Zoar Mennonite Brethren in Inman dedicated its new facility, similar in appearance to Zion and Hebron but with a prominent bell tower. Perhaps the most striking of the new buildings, however, was that of First Mennonite in Hillsboro, which decided to build a substantial new facility in the early 1960s. Dedicated in 1967, this structure was strikingly modern, with the worship space covered by a massive gambrel roof, popular in 1960s-era church building design.

Mennonite congregations of central Kansas seemed to have become comfortable with unusual rooflines, abstract patterns in stained-glass windows, cast concrete bell towers, and the display of crosses of burnished metal in their houses of worship. Those who studied and commented on Mennonite architectural trends, however, were less certain whether modernism was a better reflection of Mennonite worship space than revivalism. In 1967, architect Harold Funk—then still a student at Bethel College—wrote an assessment of Mennonite architecture and discussed Hillsboro at length. At the time, he was concerned over many aspects, including what he felt was “excessive usages of bright stained glass.” Funk concluded that “the congregation has a bold contemporary building,” but “I am not sure that it evolved from within the congregation.”

“In reacting to contemporary church building, our congregations are becoming clichés,” Funk warned. “Not only this, they also introduce symbolism not for its meaning but rather for its popularity.” Yet those congregations who rejected the allure of modernism risked erecting mere “monuments of our tradition” that lacked creativity and thought. Meanwhile, there stood “churches that are seemingly bold and contemporary” but “are still not coming to terms with the Mennonite faith.”

As one of the first Mennonites to be a practicing architect, Funk himself was at the cusp of a new change in Mennonite building circles. Theologians, college and seminary professors, and other intellectuals began to expound on finding an authentic architecture for Mennonites, not just borrowing from other disciplines. Previously, congregations that wanted to have a professional architect had to engage those from other backgrounds, often selecting architects from Wichita and Hutchinson who were well versed in the neomedieval trends. Kansas Mennonites were increasingly receptive to this high-style architecture.

These discussions coincided with efforts to create structures that more consciously reflected Mennonite ideas, such as when the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary of Elkhart, Indiana, erected its own “Chapel of the Sermon on the Mount.” This chapel was built in 1965 and designed by Chicago architect Charles Edward Stade. Among its features was the exterior appearance—irregular-shaped walls and tower with rough brick—intended to remind worshipers that the Anabaptist heritage emphasized the rigorous demands of Christ in discipleship and not only his comforting presence. This structure likely had quite an influence on ministerial students. Previously, there was no requirement that


Mennonites pastors even have seminary training. Now a whole generation of clergy had experience with Stade’s design as a model of how worship space could function.72

Changes were taking place across the world of religious architecture. Among them was a movement to look at the church building as community center, embodied in the thought of consultants like E. A. Sovik. A Lutheran like Stade, Sovik argued that the main space should be flexible, able to be rearranged as a “church in the round” or community gathering center. Zion Mennonite Church of Souderton, Pennsylvania, employed Sovik, who collaborated closely with pastor Alvin Beachy to show “the Anabaptist Vision of the church as a disciplined and gathered Community of Believers.”73

These houses of worship were the latest expressions of a debate in Mennonite circles that had been taking place for decades. In the early postwar period, one of the biggest issues facing architects and consultants in that era was the insistence on the part of congregations and building committees that a “church should look like a church.” After modernism became more acceptable, the popular perception that a house of worship should have distinctive features and appearances remained strong with stained glass windows continuing, just with bold, abstract designs, and laminated trusses arranged to form Gothic arches. For Mennonites, however, having a structure look too much like a “church” was just as problematic as having a structure that didn’t look like one. This was a worship tradition rooted in deeply held principles, including unostentatious simplicity, the rejection of excessive use of ornament and symbolism, a preference for communal gathering, and an emphasis on preaching over “priestly” sacramentalism. One person’s sensible adaptation was another’s betrayal of Mennonite distinctiveness.

Sorting out these issues could be a challenge for a tradition that favored strong congregational autonomy, a democratic rather than a representational polity, and an embrace of consensus. Among Lutheran, for example, there were national governing bodies that had staff architects and, when loans were involved, boards to review plans. Among congregations, building decisions often rested with an elected church council that worked with the pastor to guide the building committee. An unpopular building decision might result in those council members being voted out of office in the next election.

For Mennonites, however, key congregational decisions on matters of building often took place through meetings of the whole membership, not an elected body of leaders. In cases like that of Zion in Elbing, the need to have a two-thirds majority placed a major premium on encouraging as much consensus as possible. Moreover, the decentralized nature of the General Conference, for example, meant that there were few authorities who could speak or encourage particular elements of building and design.74

In the end, however, it may have been the Kansas Mennonites’ congregationalism that also provided a solution to the thorny issues of faith, ethnicity, and architecture. Each congregation was autonomous and self-governing, meaning that it could choose whether certain architectural features enhanced or violated community norms. In some cases, the decisions fell to committees who hired consultants. In other cases, the membership weighed in. The results were not always straightforward. Modest building efforts could take years to get enough support before proceeding. However, without a central body to dictate things, a community could function independently of the opinions of official publications out of Newton. As such, Mennonite building in Kansas embodied the ideals that Louis Regier, in his discussion of Mennonite church architecture in the Zion Mennonite Centennial, suggested: “Our church buildings have not been built as elaborate monuments to outshine other churches, but they adapted styles similar to other churches and the surrounding communities at the time of construction.”75